

FATEFUL ENCHANTRESS

Staff Nurse Alison Blakelock felt great sympathy for her unknown cousin Yvonne now that she was an orphan, and was eager to welcome the young girl to her home. But Yvonne was not the teenager they had all supposed; it was a beautiful, blonde young woman who arrived from the South of France! Alison felt the first little throb of pain in her heart when she saw the bemused look in Gregg Danton's eyes—for Gregg, a surgeon at the same London hospital and Alison's friend, had run her home in his car to meet her French-Canadian relative. Even when Sir Tyler Ames, an acquaintance of Yvonne's father, turned up later, he merely added further complications . . .

Belinda Dell has made full use of this intriguing situation in her story of a young nurse and the impact on her home and hospital life of a beautiful stranger.

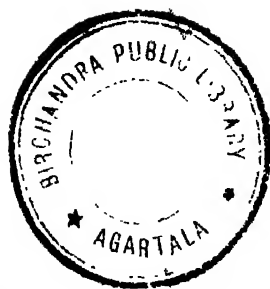
By the same author

THE HEIGHTS OF LOVE
WHO CLAIMS MY HEART
HAPPINESS HAS WINGS
SEE IF I CARE!
DEAREST ENEMY
etc.

FATEFUL ENCHANTRESS

by

BELINDA DELL



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CHAPTER ONE

"WHEN is this kid due?" Gregg asked, with only moderate interest, his capable hands sending the little red sports car in and out of the London traffic.

Alison Blakelock took off her beret to let the March wind have its way with her honey-brown hair. After a night in the wards, the cold clean air was refreshing. "We—ell," she said doubtfully, "if Dad for once gets something to go according to plan—"

"Which is possible but not probable—"

"—He'll recognize her by the red rose in her buttonhole—"

"Of all the corny ideas!" Gregg Danton cried with amusement in his lazy voice. "I'll meet you by the bookstall, you wear a red rose and I'll carry a copy of Sagan's latest book—! Couldn't he have thought of something a bit more original?"

She gave a little laugh. "The simpler the better," she pointed out. "Especially when it's Dad who's got to do the recognizing. Lucky she's coming from the South of France, where red roses are available even in March. At least I suppose so," she added doubtfully.

"If she's brought her red rose all the way from the South of France it's likely to be a bit wilted when she gets off the boat. Now if she'd come by air—"

"She couldn't afford that, Gregg. When Uncle Harold died, he left her hardly anything. As a matter of fact, Dad was going to offer to pay her fare by air, but since she'd already said she'd come by boat he guessed she was afraid of flying. So he left the arrangement the way she'd suggested it."

"But look here, didn't you tell me she'd gone to a good school? How did her father pay for that if—"

"Oh, it's really rather sad, Gregg." Her velvety brown eyes softened as she remembered what she'd heard of her young cousin's story. "Aunt Charlotte was the daughter of Émile and

Lucien Brehavre of Montreal, frightfully wealthy people—I think they own a shipping line or something.”

“Oo—er!” Gregg murmured, taking his eyes off the road to give her a glance denoting awe.

“But Charlotte met Uncle Harold while they were both studying music in Paris—at the Conservatoire, you know—”

“Stop showing off.”

“Well, it *was* at the Conservatoire—I can’t help it if it sounds impressive. Uncle Harold had got a scholarship to study there for a year, but he hadn’t a penny really. Well, I mean to say, being Dad’s brother, you might guess that. Aunt Charlotte married him despite terrific opposition from her family and was cut off without a penny. Then, poor girl, she died when Yvonne was born—” Alison broke off, sighing for the warm-hearted young Charlotte of bygone days, whose happiness had lasted so short a time.

“Yvonne? So that’s the orphan’s name, is it?” Gregg nodded his dark head appreciatively. “That’s always been one of the typically French names to me. Yvonne, Marie, and Suzanne. Marie is a country girl with rosy cheeks and one of those starched muslin caps they still wear in the villages. Suzanne is a plump young housewife with a shopping basket on her arm. And Yvonne is a midinette with sparkling black eyes and a wicked smile. Do you think this Yvonne will be like that?”

Alison wagged a slim, admonishing finger at him. “You’re a fine surgeon, Gregg, but a hopeless romantic! Let me remind you that this particular Yvonne has been strictly brought up in a good French school—”

“Yes, go on about that. Where did the money come from if your uncle was so penniless?”

“Oh, that was the Brehavres.”

“But I thought you said they cut Charlotte off with the traditional shilling?”

“They did, unkind creatures that they were. But naturally Uncle Harold wrote to them at Charlotte’s death, and their conscience seems to have troubled them a bit. So they sent a sum

of money to be invested for Yvonne, to make sure she'd be educated so as not to be a disgrace to the family. But they did this on condition that Uncle Harold never bothered them again or made any claim on them in the future. That's the trouble with folk who've got money," Alison ended seriously. "They seem to think everybody is after them to get it from them."

"Says Staff Nurse Blakelock, speaking from her vast experience of multi-millionaires," Gregg chuckled. "And what do you think Little Orphan Annie will look like, then?"

"I imagine her as small for her age—"

"Which is what, by the way?"

She smiled. "As to that, we're not exactly sure. You see, Dad hasn't heard from Uncle Harold in years, and he's really not very sure about the date of Yvonne's birth. But he thinks she's at least fifteen, and probably sixteen. Thank goodness," she added thankfully, "because a younger girl might have meant a lot of extra work for Mother, which is the last thing we want."

"I think it's awfully good of your parents to take her in like this, without ever having seen her."

"Poor kid, it's rotten for her, isn't it?" she said in troubled tones. "All the way from France on her own to meet a trio of strangers who are to be her family from now on. And her father dead less than a month ago."

There was a silence, and Gregg put one hand over hers as they lay clasped in her lap.

"You're rather nice, Alison," he said gently. "You feel a genuine concern for her, don't you?"

"Of course. Anybody would."

He gave a tiny shake of the head, and then returned to the tone of voice she was accustomed to—a lazy, drawling voice full of mockery. "Never mind how pathetic and forlorn she is," he threatened, "I want it clearly understood that you don't stay at home tonight to cheer her up. You and I have a date, remember?"

"Oh, but, Gregg—"

"Ah, ah, ah! No buts!" His hand, still over hers, administered a slight pressure before it went back to the wheel. "Think of the

planning and manœuvring that's gone on so that you could be off duty this week-end and come to Cookie's twenty-first! Three months at least, we've been talking about it. Sympathetic though I am towards your little French cousin, I think Cookie's claim is better than hers—she only hove into view about three weeks ago. And besides, after all the excitement of travelling to England and meeting you, an early night will be the best thing for her."

"I suppose so . . ."

"I'm sure of it. Good grief, girl, I hardly ever seem to see you at all these days. Even when you're off duty and I'm off duty, something crops up to keep us apart."

Alison didn't reply. Something in the warmth with which he spoke made her uncertain what to say. She and Gregg were good friends—perhaps more than that; but she still found it difficult to know just how much seriousness lay behind some of the things he said to her. The trouble was, she couldn't quite understand what he saw in her. When Alison looked in the mirror it was an appraising, cool face that looked back at her; only in speaking to others or thinking of others did that soft warmth come to her face, the warmth that lifted her pleasant features into the realm of beauty. Her eyes were especially noticeable for their soft glow of interest when she was at work in the wards of Crownham District General Hospital, where she had trained and which was a major part of her life.

Gregg Danton was a registrar there, on one of the surgical "firms". Alison had known him quite well for a long time—over a year. Then, on her last spell of night duty about six months ago, recurring emergencies had brought her into closer contact with the surgeon on call, who had happened to be Gregg. Even then it hadn't occurred to Alison that anything more might come of it. It was Gregg—yes she could honestly say it was Gregg who had sought her out.

It was pleasant to think he'd done that. Among the nurses at Crownham District, Gregg was spoken of approvingly—he was "a darling", "such fun to talk to". Alison found him all this, but it was better not to attach too much importance to his friendship.

"Luckily," she told herself often, "I haven't let myself get too fond of him."

The drive from the hospital to her parents' house in Crownham Square took them from one side of this busy London district to the other. But now they were turning into the square, where a sharp breeze swayed the evergreens and tore the placards off the boards in front of the newsagent's on the corner.

"Nice old place, this," Gregg said appreciatively. "Pity it's been let go to rack and ruin. You'd think the Ministry of Works or the L.C.C. or somebody would try to preserve what's left of this nice old Georgian architecture."

Alison nodded, but as she got out of the car her eyes were on the upper storeys of her own home. At one of the windows her mother appeared, beckoning vigorously. "Come on, Gregg," she urged her companion. "There's mother upstairs still hard at work, and it looks as if she needs help."

They hurried indoors. Sylvia Blakelock was leaning over the bannister from the first landing. "Oh—Gregg dear—I wonder if you'd mind—this bookcase—"

"Mother, you haven't been trying to shift a bookcase!" Alison protested anxiously.

"But, darling, I had to—the spare room looked so frightfully empty and unwelcoming I thought I'd bring in that little bookcase from your room. You don't mind, do you, Alison?"

Although it meant cramming her own books into a cupboard Alison had no objection to parting with the bookcase. What worried her was the amount of hard physical work her mother had been putting in since Yvonne was expected. Their house in Crownham Square was very narrow and three storeys tall: doing the housework involved trotting up and downstairs a hundred times a day, and if anything had to be moved the narrow angle of the staircase involved tremendous difficulties. Yvonne had been given the spare room, which was on the second floor; Alison shuddered at the thought of her mother trying to transport a bookcase, however lightweight, singlehanded up these steep stairs.

Sylvia Blakelock wasn't strong, never had been. This was one

of the reasons that Alison had chosen to "live in" at the hospital, so as to save work and ease the burden on her mother. Last weekend Alison had given up all her time off to help prepare the spare room, and it disturbed her now to find Sylvia still trying "improvements" and wearing herself out.

Gregg had run up the stairs ahead of her and picked up the little bookcase with ease. He took it up to the second floor, Alison following in his wake with her mother.

"Whereabouts do you want it?" he inquired, glancing about the spare room.

"Opposite the dressing-table, I thought," Sylvia suggested, tilting her grey head doubtfully. "Or do you think—close by the bed, in case she likes to read before she goes to sleep?"

Finally the bookcase was placed alongside the bed, whose fresh new chintz cover crackled crisply as they passed to and fro.

"The curtains look lovely," Alison murmured, surveying the room. "Young and fresh—just right for a young girl."

"I do wish we'd had time to redecorate, though," Sylvia mourned. "And another thing, Alison—do you think maybe the poor little thing will feel lonely and cut off, all by herself up here? I wondered afterwards if it wouldn't have been better to put her in your room . . ."

"See how she feels," Alison suggested. "If she's a typical teenager she may be glad to have the whole floor to herself—she might like to have a record-player or something like that, and invite her friends in once she's made some."

"But if she'd rather be in your room—?"

"Then move her by all means. I'm home only part of the time so it wouldn't be fair to act dog-in-the-manger."

Gregg grinned at her. "An expression like that sounds absurd, applied to you. Anyone less likely to act dog-in-the-manger would be hard to imagine."

Sylvia was moving restlessly about the room. "I don't know," she muttered. "The place still seems to lack something . . ."

"Flowers," Alison exclaimed. "That's what it needs."

"Of course! Oh, how could I have been so silly as not to think of flowers for her room—I"

"It's not too late," Gregg declared. "I'll go and get some, shall I? Where's the nearest shop?"

"Just round the corner, Gregg—about three doors from the newsagent—"

"What'll I get? Lilac to match the bedspread?"

"In early March? It would cost the earth! You'd better—"

"Let's just see what they've got, eh?" Gregg replied, and ran downstairs three at a time.

"He is such a nice young man," Alison's mother said approvingly. "Why haven't you brought him home oftener, darling?"

"There simply hasn't been the opportunity, Mother. Either he's on duty or I am, and in any case—I don't know that he really wants to—I don't know if he'd like to be considered—"

Her mother nodded understandingly but already her mind was returning to the coming of the new member of the family. "I do hope she'll like the colour scheme. Later on we must see if we can afford a new wardrobe in a lighter wood. If I economize really hard . . ."

Her daughter smiled to herself. Sylvia Blakelock was always promising to economize really hard, but nothing ever came of it. The only one in the family with any head for figures was Alison. It was she, in her spare time, who kept the books of her father's little printing business and it was she who stepped in when her mother got in a muddle with the housekeeping money. In fact, an outsider might have said that Alison was both the mainspring and the mainstay of her family—and this was another of the reasons why she had chosen to leave home even if it was only to go as far as the nurses' quarters of the local hospital. She was afraid of growing domineering and of having her parents too dependent upon her. As an only child she had sensed her danger and made what she hoped was a sensible decision—to live far enough from home to ensure her escape from too much responsibility, but close enough to keep an eye on things in case her help was needed. She had longed many times for a brother or a sister to share the family

problems, and perhaps it was because of this secret longing that she now looked forward so keenly to the arrival of the new cousin from France.

A loud masculine voice rang out below. "Hallo-o! Where is everybody?"

The two women exchanged a startled glance and ran to the bedroom door. "They're here!" "Gregg must have left the door open or we'd have heard them come in!"

From the landing Alison could see her father's grey head. He was stooping to set down a suitcase. He straightened and beckoned to someone who, apparently, was hesitating in the front doorway. Alison suddenly remembered that her mother ought to be ahead of her to greet the newcomer, and stood back to allow her to reach the stairs first. They came down one behind the other which gave her a view over her mother's head.

And when Sylvia stopped suddenly, her breath indrawn in surprise, Alison did the same.

Coming through the front door was a girl of, perhaps, nineteen. Her pale skin stood out with the sheen of pearls against the severe black of her clothes. Soft fair hair was brushed high off her forehead, fine hands were clasped nervously round a crumpled pair of gloves. The doorway made a frame for her: for a moment there was the impression of a beautiful figure stepping out of a painting. Then she turned her head towards her uncle as if to say, "Isn't anyone going to speak?" and her lips trembled in a smile of the most heart-breaking pathos.

Eric Blakelock put a protective arm about her shoulders. Compared with his sturdy frame the girl seemed even more delicate and fragile. He glanced at his wife. "Well, my dear?" he urged.

But Sylvia had been stricken dumb. It was left to Alison to urge her mother down the few remaining stairs, saying quickly and sincerely, "Oh, we're so glad to see you, Yvonne! We've looked forward to it so much!"

The girl held out both hands in a gesture of greeting. The three of them smiled and began to talk at once. Impulsively

Sylvia threw her arms about her niece. "My dear little Yvonne!" she murmured. "What a beauty you are! Welcome to your new home, dear, welcome, welcome!"

Alison saw tears gleam in the grave dark-blue eyes. There was a tremor in her voice as Yvonne replied "Thank you—your kind letter meant so much to me, Aunt Sylvia." The faintest hint of a French accent lent charm to the low tones.

They were asking about her journey and helping her off with her coat when a figure darkened the still open doorway and Gregg came into the narrow hall, his arms full of lilac and spring flowers.

"Hello!" he said in smiling surprise to the group on its way towards the living-room door, their backs towards him. "I'm just in time to add my welcome, I see."

They turned. As Gregg caught sight of Yvonne for the first time Alison saw his face change. He stared at her, the way men stare at the unbelievable, the wonderful—almost with awe.

"Yvonne, this is a friend of mine, Gregg Danton, from the hospital where I work. Gregg, our new cousin Yvonne."

Yvonne nodded gravely. "How do you do?" she said. A little smile played about her lips; it might have been in response to the wonder in Gregg's eyes.

He came towards her slowly. "Welcome to London," he said on a note of unsteadiness. And then remembering the flowers he carried, he held them out to her.

Through all that was to happen later, Alison was haunted by the memory of that gesture and the look on Gregg's face as he made it. It was a tribute, a deserved tribute, to perfection.

At that moment a little throb of pain began in Alison's heart. In the months to come, she learned to live with it.

CHAPTER TWO

"You'll stay to lunch, Gregg?" Mrs. Blakelock asked.

"I only wish I could. Unfortunately an old pal of my student days has come down from Glasgow and I promised to meet him for lunch."

"Dinner then? Come and have dinner with us, and spend the evening. The fact is," Sylvia confided, with an upward jerk of her head towards the room where Yvonne was taking her coat off, "a little bit of company would help us over this first evening, if you could come." She brushed nervously at her fine grey hair.

"Thanks, I'd love to," Gregg said eagerly.

"But what about Cookie's party?" Alison put in in surprise.

"What?"

"Cookie's twenty-first—?"

"Who's Cookie?" inquired Sylvia.

"You've heard me mention her, Mother—Nancy Cookson, one of the nurses. She was twenty-one on Tuesday and she's having a party tonight."

"Oh dear. You mean you and Gregg aren't going to be at home this evening?"

"Of course we are, Mrs. Blakelock," Gregg broke in. "It really doesn't matter about the party. The arrangement was just that we'd come if we could. You don't really want to go, do you, Alison?"

Alison shook her head. Quite genuinely, she preferred to stay at home on her new cousin's first evening with the family. All the same, she could have wished that Gregg had been less eager. But she checked this half-formed thought. Gregg had a right to change his mind, hadn't he?

He had to leave immediately to keep his lunch date. "Tell Yvonne I'll see her this evening," he urged as he hurried off.

Lunch was difficult. Out of a natural desire to have everything

looking nice, Sylvia had prepared a rather too elaborate meal which meant that she was constantly jumping up and disappearing into the kitchen. Her husband, anxious to help, would rush after her. Conversation was left to Alison. She set about finding a topic that would interest her cousin.

There was always the journey from Marseilles, of course. And what she thought of England.

"But it's so cold!" Yvonne cried. "Papa used to say England would teach me the real meaning of 'cold'. But I'd no idea the wind would be so awful." She sipped appreciatively at the fine white wine Sylvia had provided as an accompaniment to the veal. "Never mind about the weather, though. Tell me about your young man."

"My what?"

"Gregg, who gave me the beautiful lilac. That's what you call him in England, isn't it—your young man."

Alison laughed. "If the feeling between us justified it, that's what he'd be called."

"Just a colleague, then? Is he anyone important? He's very distingué, with that alert look that always makes a handsome man look more than *merely* handsome. He comes often to the house, I imagine? I remember he walked in as though he were quite at home. Although I believe that's quite usual in England—Papa used to say that even in old, distinguished families formality was dying."

"Perhaps it is," Alison agreed. "Though I dare say the families of your school friends pay quite a lot of attention to that kind of thing. One gets the impression that French people are a bit more formal than we are."

"Oh, indeed they are. Some of them won't even allow their daughters to take up nursing, which is going rather far. Some careers that women take up these days—yes, they'd have grounds for objecting. But to be disapproving about nursing shows a really dyed-in-the-wool outlook. I can imagine how unhappy you'd have been if family traditions had prevented you from following your chosen career."

"Traditions?" Alison repeated, puzzled.

A diversion was caused by the return of her mother and father bearing between them the pudding and the sauces to go with it. Alison would have liked to pursue the matter of the supposed family traditions, but the moment had passed. Yvonne was complimenting her aunt on her cooking.

"Oh, goodness, I expect it's very amateurish compared with what you were used to in France," Sylvia disclaimed, blushing like a child with pleasure.

"No, as a matter of fact, the food at school was rather plain and dull. We were educated in the Spartan tradition. I hated it."

"But at home—? Your father had a housekeeper, I suppose."

Yvonne made a charming little grimace of amused disapproval. "You'd have disapproved terribly of Papa's housekeeping! He did it himself—bread, cheap wine, and cheese. You see, I was at boarding school except for the holidays, and even those I often spent with one schoolfellow or another. Papa used to say it didn't matter how he lived so long as I was well looked after. Oh, he was a careless, impractical man—a real Bohemian. He made hardly any money with his musical compositions. We never had what normal people would call a *home*. That's why I was so thrilled at the idea of living in a proper house—not in a stuffy little one-room studio with one corner screened off as my bedroom."

"My dear child!" Sylvia was scandalized. "It wasn't as bad as that, surely?"

"Oh, it was awful, really it was. Papa didn't see it my way. He rather liked it but then, as he said, he was used to it. But I always longed for a proper home—a family home like this one, that's been handed down from generation to generation."

Alison glanced at her father. "From generation to generation?"

Eric was willing to put a broad interpretation on the phrase if the idea gave pleasure to his pretty young niece. "True enough," he nodded, tugging at his grey moustache. "My father had this house before me."

"That's what I mean! This family has roots—background—social standing. I could never get Papa to see how much better it

would have been for us if we'd had that kind of life. Of course, the truth was, he didn't earn enough to provide it. If kind relatives—" she swept the table with her shy smile—"hadn't supplied the money, I might not even have had my education."

"Poor little girl," Sylvia said softly, her eyes misty. "We must make it all up to you."

"I'm sure everything's going to be different now," Yvonne replied in a tone of shy delight. "I've read so much about life in London—the London Season, the Royal Garden Parties, the private view at the Royal Academy, Ascot—I'm looking forward to going to these big occasions, to meeting all your grand friends. I'm afraid I can't offer any socially acceptable English friends to add to your list. Except Sir Tyler Ames—but I expect you know him already."

"I seem to have heard the name," Alison murmured. "Isn't he a music publisher?"

"That's right. I met him when he came to Marseilles about publishing some of Papa's music. You've met him?"

"Not that I can remember," Alison said drily.

"He is rather that type—you can't remember whether you've met him or not. Rather self-effacing, although he's a very successful business man, I understand. But then money isn't everything, is it? I mean, no amount of money can compensate for the dullness that clings around some business men."

"I hope you're not looking at me when you say that!" joked Eric.

"Oh, Uncle Eric! As if I would! In any case, of you it wouldn't be true. In you respectability and success are matched with other qualities—warmth and kindness, for instance."

Flattered, Eric smiled on her. Sylvia began a catalogue of her husband's good points. Still chatting, she led Yvonne upstairs at the end of the meal to help unpack.

"I'll do the washing up," volunteered Alison, knowing how her father hated this chore.

Yvonne paused in the doorway of the dining-room. "Does the maid get the week-end off?" she asked.

Alison looked up, wondering if it were a joke. But no, Yvonne's gentian blue eyes were politely enquiring.

"We haven't got a maid," she said, rather puzzled at the remark.

Yvonne nodded. "I used to read in English magazines about how difficult it was to get staff," she murmured. "I'd no idea things were so bad that even a family like this would be unable to find someone suitable. Have you advertised in French newspapers?"

"No, we haven't. We—"

"Oh, you should," recommended Yvonne earnestly. "Lots of French servants would jump at the chance to work for a good English family."

"Coming, Yvonne?" called her aunt from halfway up the stairs.

"Coming!" she replied, and hurried out with a quick, light step.

As Alison began on the washing up she was conscious of a small uneasiness. "Dad," she began uncertainly, "does it strike you that Yvonne has a rather odd notion about the way we live?"

"Oh, I wouldn't say that," her father replied, stacking plates at her elbow ready for her to wash. "It's just different from what she's used to, that's all."

"No, you don't see what I mean—"

"Look at it this way. Poor old Harold couldn't afford to make a proper home for her. Most of her life was spent at this snob boarding school, mixing with girls whose families had a lot of money. So you see she's never come into contact with many ordinary, run-of-the-mill families like us."

"I quite see that. But even if it were true, surely she knows that ordinary folk like us don't talk about 'family traditions' or expect to take part in the 'London Season'. As for having a maid—"

"I believe domestic help is a lot cheaper in France. Quite ordinary families can afford a maid. I read that somewhere," Eric said vaguely.

"But what about this idea of our house being handed down for generations?" Alison insisted. "Who gave her that impression?"

"Well, I did inherit this house from my father—"

"That's not the same thing at all and you know it! The way she used it, she meant something really old—almost historic—"

"Be reasonable, Alison. Don't forget that no matter how well she speaks it, English isn't her first language. Quite possibly, there are shades of meaning that she can't quite express."

There was a great deal of truth in that. Alison thought it over while she finished the dishes. Her father meanwhile escaped to the sitting-room to smoke a pipe and watch football on television. By and by Sylvia came down to the kitchen with a photograph album.

"She said I might show you these while she finished unpacking. Look, here she is on the school tennis court. And here she is as the Angel in the school Nativity Play—doesn't she look lovely? And see here—pictures of her school friends, autographed. Look at some of those names—now that one, I'm sure, is the car millionaire. Just imagine, Yvonne went to school with his daughter! Yet she's not a bit stuck-up. Do you know what she actually said to me a moment ago? She hoped her uncle would show her round his factory and offices. Now isn't it nice of her to take an interest in the business?"

"Factory?" Alison queried.

"Well, she means printing-works. I explained that we didn't use the word factory for that."

"Did you explain that it was only a small place in a back street, with a staff of two including Dad?"

Her mother closed the album, one slender finger marking the place. "What a funny question! Naturally I didn't go into any details. You know I don't understand much about the business side—and as she'll be seeing it all on Monday I didn't try to describe it."

"I hope it isn't a shock when she sees it."

"Why should it be? It's nothing to write home about, but it's quite a tidy little place and—"

"I only thought that if she was expecting a 'factory' she's going to be disappointed. You know, Mother, I'm a bit worried. I was

just saying to Dad, I can't help wondering if Yvonne expected us to be a bit higher up the social and financial scale than we are."

"Whatever makes you say that? I thought she spoke very properly about money not being everything."

"But she bracketed Dad's 'respectability' with success. Would you say Dad was a successful businessman in the same way as this dull old Sir Tyler Ames?"

"Your father's got nothing to be ashamed of in his business."

"I never said he had. All I'm saying is that Yvonne may think it brings in more than it actually does. She seems to expect to be taken to Ascot, for instance—"

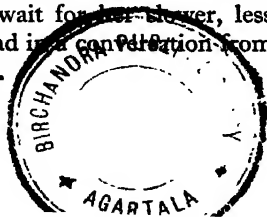
"Well, if you want to know, I've always wanted to go myself, Alison. I don't see anything so terrible in that."

Alison couldn't help a chuckle as she closed the cupboard on the last of the dishes. Her mother was totally incapable of thinking harm of anyone, and for all Alison knew Yvonne's desire to go to Ascot might be just the same sort of day-dreaming as Sylvia had been indulging in all her life.

The arrival of this young cousin had been an event of great promise and interest to Alison. She hoped to find her a close friend and companion. If she wanted to go to Ascot, why shouldn't they take her? Oh, there was a great deal to look forward to!

For instance—and more immediate than Ascot!—Gregg was coming to dinner.

He arrived carrying an armful of magazines and newspapers. "These are to give you an idea of what's on in and around London," he explained as he donated them to Yvonne. Until dinner was ready he and Yvonne sat with their heads together, blonde head touching brown, as they leafed through the pages. It was extraordinary how effortlessly they slipped into a gay comradeship over a discussion of theatres, concerts, exhibitions, even fashion shows. At first, Alison was asked for an opinion now and again. But she seemed unable to chime in with their mood. They wouldn't wait for her slower, less enthusiastic comments; they raced ahead in a conversation from which she was excluded more and more.



After dinner the idea sprang up that Yvonne ought to see the West End at night, with all the lights sparkling.

"I'd love a breath of air," Yvonne admitted, her eyes bright with expectation. "But I don't want to drag you all out just to show me what you must have seen a hundred times already."

Sylvia confessed that she was too tired to want to go out—a fact that didn't surprise Alison when she thought of the work she must have put in on the elaborate lunch and even more elaborate dinner.

"Why don't you young ones go out by yourselves?" suggested Eric jovially, puffing at his pipe. "You don't want old dodderers slowing you down. If Gregg can fit you both into that little sports car of his, that would be the ideal way of seeing the sights—far better than craning your neck out of our old station waggon."

"An English sports car?" Yvonne exclaimed. "Oh, but that is chic beyond anything! I wanted all my life to ride in an English sports car!"

"Nothing simpler," Gregg laughed. "But unfortunately it's a two-seater. There simply isn't room for three. It'll have to be another time, Yvonne."

"But I wanted to go tonight! What a climax to my first day in England!"

"Couldn't you squeeze two slim young 'uns in, Gregg?" Eric suggested.

"Not with comfort. And think how bad it would be for my driving!"

"Then I'm sure Alison wouldn't mind staying at home," Sylvia remarked. "After all, Alison's seen the lights of the West End."

"Oh, but it hardly seems fair to leave her—"

"You don't mind not going with them, do you Alison?" her mother demanded.

What could Alison say but "No, of course not"?

"You're sure? Oh, how sweet of you, Alison. I should have been desolate not to go in the sports car."

"In that case the sooner you run up and get your coat the sooner you'll be on your way," she suggested, hiding her disappointment.

"We needn't take long about it, you know," Gregg said rather guiltily when Yvonne had sped upstairs. "We'll be back in about an hour."

But they were not. It was close to midnight when, laughing and flushed with enjoyment, they drove up to the door once more.

"We didn't mean to be so late," Yvonne apologized prettily, "but Gregg kept finding new things to show me. He said you would not be angry."

"So long as you enjoyed yourself that's all that matters," her aunt told her in a tolerant, drowsy tone. "Now come along—up to bed."

"Shall I see you tomorrow?" Gregg asked, putting a delaying hand on Yvonne's arm.

"Why not, if Aunt Sylvia doesn't disapprove?" she replied, with an apprehensive glance at her aunt that might have been meant in fun.

Sylvia, naturally, made no objection. Why should she? Alison asked herself this question many times before she went to sleep, and could find no satisfactory answer.

The Sunday papers had lain on the mat for more than an hour before the house was stirring next morning. Alison started the breakfast, hoping her mother would take things a little easier today; but as she was about to go upstairs to mention that breakfast would soon be on the table, Sylvia herself appeared.

"Oh, you've nearly finished. I could smell the bacon upstairs. Now, quick, give me the yellow traycloth out of the drawer."

"What for?" Almost automatically Alison was obeying, but then paused. "You're not thinking of giving Yvonne breakfast in bed?"

"Of course. After a tiring day and a late night—"

"That was what you had too. If anyone needs breakfast in bed it's you. Now, Mother, please stop trying to do so much for Yvonne. You'll wear yourself out."

"Pooh! Taking up a breakfast tray isn't going to kill me."

Seeing she was determined, Alison picked up the tray. "Sit down and eat your breakfast. I'll take this up to Yvonne."

Yvonne was half-awake, her thick lashes screening her eyes from the strong spring sunlight. "Mm. . m. .," she murmured languorously. "Don't tell me it's time to get up already."

"It's quite late. Mother thought you ought to have breakfast in bed. I hope you like tea for breakfast? It's what we usually have."

"Well, I'm used to coffee, of course."

"Another morning you'll be up to make it for yourself, I expect."

"I wouldn't bank on it," Yvonne murmured, lazily pulling herself up onto her pillows and fluffing out her hair. "Hand me my dressing-gown, will you?"

Alison set the tray on her cousin's knees and then did as she was bid. "Yvonne, I wanted to ask for your help. Mother tends to do too much for people she cares about—for instance it was her idea that you should have breakfast in bed."

"How sweet of her—"

"Yes, but Yvonne, if I hadn't been here it would have been Mother toiling up those two flights of stairs. And she's not very strong. So if you could just let her see that you don't expect this kind of thing—?"

"You can count on me," Yvonne responded quickly. "And of course once I've written to one or two of my old school friends to see if they can recommend a servant—"

"That's another thing," said Alison. She turned the chair round from the dressing table and sat down. "Mind if I sit and chat while you eat?"

"Not a bit," Yvonne said with cheerful nonchalance. "Although actually I doubt if I shall do much eating. This toast's a bit thick, and I'm not really used to a meal like this first thing. I suppose you can't get *croissants* in England?"

"Not in time for breakfast, unless you make them yourself."

"I don't think they're difficult to make. And as Aunt Sylvia seems to enjoy cooking perhaps she might like to whip up a few—"

"But weren't we just saying that she ought to be spared extra work?"

"Oh, yes, how silly of me. Well, never mind about the *croissants*."

I want to talk about something much more interesting. Tell me about Gregg."

Alison smiled. "I'd have thought he'd tell you all about himself last night. He loves to talk about his work."

"His surgical cases, and how the hospital management committee spend money on the wrong things—I heard all that." Yvonne laughed. "Such a romantic idealist, for all his brains! But what I want to know is, who is he? What are his family? He must be *somebody*, or he wouldn't be allowed to come visiting here, I imagine."

Alison tried to understand what this might mean. It seemed an odd way of talking, but after all Yvonne's English, as her father averred, mightn't be absolutely perfect.

"He's Gregory Danton, younger son of Peter Danton, a major in the R.A.M.C. who was killed on duty in Malaya. His mother married again and is settled in Kuala Lumpur now. His brother Jim is a Medical Officer in the Colonial Service, somewhere out in the South Seas—"

Yvonne set down her teacup with a playful grimace of annoyance. "I don't mean that kind of thing, Alison. I mean, who are they? Who do they know? Are they people of standing? And Gregg—presumably this job at the hospital is only a stepping stone to—what is the place of the fashionable doctors?—Harley Street."

"Harley Street?" Alison exclaimed. "Good heavens, Gregg is years away from Harley Street—even if that's what he's aiming at, which I doubt."

"At what, then, is he aiming? A man of his intelligence won't stay forever in a junior post in an unheard-of hospital."

"I'm afraid I don't know how to answer that, Yvonne. Gregg's ambitions are concerned mainly with becoming a better surgeon. I don't believe he's ever given a thought to money or prestige. He comes of a family that has given itself to medicine and expects very little in return—a living, and the satisfaction of a job well done. Certainly neither he nor his family have any claim to fame."

"Ah . . . Now I begin to understand why he was not allowed to

consider himself your 'young man'. He's hardly eligible. What a shame—he's so attractive and intelligent. Well, never mind. He makes a pleasant escort, doesn't he, and there's no need to let things go beyond that." She lifted the tray and held it out to Alison. "Would you take this away like the angel you are? I'd better get up and make myself respectable. Gregg asked if he may take me out sightseeing, and though perhaps Aunt Sylvia may frown a little, considering how unimportant his people are, still she made no actual objection."

Utterly bewildered, Alison went downstairs again. The conversation she'd just had was nothing like the one she'd intended. Yet in a way she drew some unformulated comfort from it: it was as if she had heard Yvonne draw up a profit-and-loss account of points for and against Gregg, and set him aside as unsuitable. Alison thought it an incredibly odd performance. She had heard that French people were more realistic about love and marriage than the English, but that they were in the habit of looking over a young man like an accountant—! Perhaps the merchants' daughters with whom Yvonne had been brought up used to carry out this debit and credit assessment; wherever it was derived from, to Alison it seemed a little too cold-hearted.

After breakfast, while their niece was still trying on and discarding dresses upstairs, Alison's parents went out to church. Alison sat down in the window alcove of the sitting-room to write some letters, but her attention was soon attracted by the sound of Gregg's sports car drawing up outside. She rose to go and let him in.

"Don't bother, Alison!" cried Yvonne from halfway downstairs, and before she had stepped into the hall Alison heard the front door being opened. "See you at lunchtime!" her cousin called, and banged the door shut behind her.

She heard Gregg's laughing greeting, and turned back to the sitting-room window in time to see him hand Yvonne into the car. Suddenly afraid that they would glance round and see her, and realize what she was feeling from the desolate look on her face, she drew back.

She went out to post her letter and take a stroll. It was a pleasant

enough day. Had she known she was going to be on her own she could have rung one of her friends and arranged to go out. Her parents were back when she returned, and exchanged little smiles when they heard Gregg had carried off Yvonne for more sight-seeing.

"You don't mind, do you, Alison?" her mother ventured.

"Mind? Why should I? They're perfectly at liberty to do what they like," she said shortly.

"I only thought—Of course it's quite true you said yesterday that there was nothing—It's just as well, really, isn't it? I mean now that he and Yvonne seem to—"

When at last the sightseers showed up they were late for lunch and full of apologies. "We just went further than we realized," Yvonne said, with an odd note of apprehension in her voice. "Gregg kept saying you wouldn't mind, Aunt Sylvia."

"My dear child, I told you last night, I don't object in the least. I can't understand why you think I would. Do I look like an ogress?"

"Of course not. Only you see my school friends always had to be so careful not to annoy their parents . . . May Gregg stay to lunch, then?"

Sylvia looked perplexed. The truth was, the meal was ready and there wasn't enough for an extra guest. Gregg, seeing her hesitation, understood at once and took his leave, murmuring that he was expected by his colleagues at the hospital. Yvonne, apparently wondering if her aunt's lack of eagerness to invite Gregg to stay was due to some slight disapproval, went submissively into the dining-room at her side. Alison was left to see Gregg off.

He hesitated on the doorstep. "Alison, don't think I'm being silly, but why should Yvonne expect such a strict etiquette in your family?"

"I don't really know," Alison replied. "It's puzzled me a bit too, I must admit. I suppose these well-brought-up French girls with whom she went to school had to obey the conventions pretty strictly."

"But that's different. Most of them were heiresses. I'd have

thought Yvonne would know that an ordinary English family would be quite different. Unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless she expected—Correct me if I'm wrong, Alison, but I thought your father was a printer, not a publisher."

"You know he's a printer. He printed the programmes for the hospital pantomime."

"That's what I thought. I don't know whether in France the two words are synonymous?"

"I shouldn't think so. Why?"

"Yvonne talked about your father's publishing firm this morning. The Blakelock Press—of course it *does* sound imposing. It may have given her the idea that your family is—well, higher-placed than it actually is."

"I've had exactly the same feeling, Gregg."

"I'm not criticizing her, you know," he said quickly. "I think she's under a genuine mistake. But I do get the feeling she thinks she's come to live with a family right in the forefront of London society."

"I can't imagine where the idea sprang from. It's worrying, isn't it."

"Could you speak to her about it, Alison? I mean, if she's under a misapprehension, she may say something that quite unintentionally could jar on your father or mother. The last thing she'd want is to hurt anyone."

"Oh, I don't think it's my place to—"

"But you can't let her go blundering on under a mistaken idea, Alison. It would be downright cruel."

Unwillingly she nodded. "All right," she said.

Gregg looked relieved and said goodbye in happier tones. During lunch Yvonne talked brightly about her morning's sight-seeing. When it was over she settled down in the sitting-room with the magazines Gregg had brought her. Alison for once made no move to undertake the washing-up. She let her parents embark on it, and when they were both thoroughly busy went into the sitting-room, closing the door firmly behind her.

"Yvonne, can I talk to you a minute?" she said gently.

Without looking up from the engrossing delights of her magazine, Yvonne waved a hand at a chair. Alison sat down. When she didn't speak Yvonne read on for a while and then raised her eyes. At sight of Alison's rather serious expression her mouth drooped.

"It's about staying out so long with Gregg, isn't it?" she murmured. "I'm sorry. I know it wasn't quite the thing, but I thought Aunt Sylvia had decided not to reprimand me."

"My mother is the last person in the world to reprimand anyone," Alison said. "She's too kind-hearted even to try—"

"And that's why you've undertaken the task? I am sorry, Alison. I really am. I know in France in a family of this standing I shouldn't have been allowed, but I thought that in England—"

"What is the standing of the Blakelocks, Yvonne? Where do you place us in the social scale?"

Yvonne's eyebrows went up. "Aren't you being rather hard on me? I've said I'm sorry—"

"I'm not being hard on you. My dear, I'm only trying to find out who you think we are. Tell me."

"Why . . . can there be any doubt?"

"It seems there can. What do you know about the Blakelocks? Who told you what you know?"

"Papa, of course. He used to say he was a poor example of a true Blakelock, and it was because of that that your parents had so little to do with him. I don't hold it against you," she added in a tone of hasty conciliation.

"But what did he say about us? What was the first time, for instance, that you can remember his mentioning us?"

Her cousin looked bewildered, but obediently cast her mind back. "Actually I remember it rather well. One of the older girls at school had been rather mean to me about having my dress hem let down for the second year. Papa said I was to tell her that English people of good class grew fond of their clothes and wore them until they were really shabby. He said it wasn't what you wore but who you were that counted."

"I agree with him so far," murmured Alison.

"Oh, there is something in it, but clothes are important all the same. When I asked him why I couldn't have new ones, he explained that the allowance didn't extend to many new clothes. But he said the next time Annette sneered at my dress I was to tell her that a member of the Blakelock family could wear rags and still be more important than the daughter of a rich scrap-merchant—which is what Annette was." Yvonne's mouth curved in mischievous laughter.

"And why was a Blakelock important?" Alison inquired softly.

"Oh . . . because of our fame as publishers of fine books, because of the family tradition of learning and wit, because of the place we occupy in English society. Perhaps publishing doesn't bring in quite so much money as Annette's family business, but books are much more respectable than scrap metal!"

With a sigh Alison reached forward and took her cousin's hand. "My father doesn't publish books," she said.

Yvonne looked at her, and then at their joined hands. "What did you say?"

"He doesn't publish books. He prints dance programmes and catalogues and pamphlets, and he doesn't earn very much doing it."

"What—what are you talking about, Alison?"

"We're nothing like what you imagined, Yvonne. The printing business is a little workshop about half a mile away, with a couple of presses—that's all. This house, it's true, belonged to my grandfather. But *he* bought it. It wasn't handed down to him. It hasn't been in the family more than two generations."

"But Papa told me—"

"I can guess what he told you, and I think I can guess why. He was trying to build up a defence for you against the sneers of the other girls. If he had lived, he would have explained what he had done, so that when you met us at last you wouldn't have had these illusions about our wealth and position."

"But—it *must* be true. He always used to say—" She broke off, angry distress in her face and something akin to terror in her

voice. "Wait! My school fees! Someone must have paid those. Papa could never have afforded it. Now you must have money in the family, Alison, otherwise how could you have sent money for my school fees?"

Alison shook her head. "That money came from some investments made for you by your mother's family."

"My mother's family?"

"The Brehavres of Montreal. Did your father never speak of them?"

"Never. I don't think I ever heard him mention the name."

"They ordered him never to contact them again after your mother died. He and your mother married against her family's wishes, and were never forgiven."

"You mean—the Brehavres have money?" Yvonne's mouth was trembling.

"And position and a family history—yes. But they refused to have anything to do with you, Yvonne, so your father transferred all *their* importance to the make-believe version of the Blakelocks with which he bolstered up your morale."

"The fool!" The word was torn out of Yvonne. "The impractical fool! To let me believe that the Blakelocks were the important ones—it's just the sort of stupid thing—"

"Yvonne!" Alison cried, in a tone that checked her cousin's hard, violent outburst.

Yvonne turned away, snatching her hand free. For a moment there was a strained silence as she struggled for self-control. Then she looked once more at Alison. "I'm sorry," she said. "Only it's made me look an idiot. I must have sounded crazy to you, talking the way I did. Oh, what a silly trick to play on me! If I had only known! I could have gone somewhere else—the Duvals wanted to help me."

"You mean you wish you hadn't come to us?" Alison asked in dismay.

"Oh no—no, of course not—I was only thinking of it from your point of view—perhaps having me come to stay has been inconvenient—"

"Not a bit of it. You know we're delighted to have you, Yvonne."

Yvonne jumped up and walked restlessly about the room. "But there won't be any chance to meet anyone," she began—then broke off.

"Meet anyone?"

"Oh, it's nothing. I'd been looking forward to meeting gay, intelligent people."

"Well, you've met Gregg."

"Yes, but he hasn't any—" Once more she broke off. Alison could have sworn she was going to say, "But he hasn't any money."

Then all at once Yvonne's face relaxed. "Of course," she said softly. "What a fool I am. I don't need to go looking for someone new. I already know someone who may do very well."

"What on earth are you talking about, Yvonne?" Alison cried in perplexity.

Her cousin went to the mirror and subjected her looks to a long, judicial scrutiny. A little smile of satisfaction broke out on her lovely face, a smile that was triumphant and almost guileful.

When she turned back to Alison the smile was gone. She looked merely thoughtful. "I'd almost forgotten him," she said in level tones. "But there's always Tyler."

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Alison returned to duty at the hospital that evening she felt reasonably confident her cousin would settle down at home. It had been agreed between them that nothing should be said to Alison's parents about the unfortunate misconception under which Yvonne had arrived—"it might hurt their feelings," Yvonne pointed out.

Alison had tentatively mentioned Gregg. "Gregg's no problem," Yvonne replied. "He doesn't come into it at all."

"You mean you won't be seeing him again?" Alison asked, with a sudden surge of hope.

"I don't say that, exactly. I like him—he's a darling. In fact, if he rings tomorrow as he said he would, I shall probably go out with him. It might be as well to get as much fun as possible at present, because later on my time may be rather occupied."

"Occupied with what?"

"With Tyler, of course."

"This is Sir Tyler Ames you're talking about? The man who came to see your father about some music he wanted to publish?"

"I owe it to Papa's memory," Yvonne explained. "I owe it to him to contact Tyler and see if he wants to go on with publication."

That seemed perfectly reasonable and Alison left it at that. For most of the following week she was extremely busy; her ward was full of burn cases from a big fire at a local factory, and they were a source of anxiety to her every night for many nights to come. Each day, in duty bound, she found time and energy for a telephone conversation with her mother to find out how Yvonne was settling in.

"She's such fun!" Sylvia cried enthusiastically. "Such a sweet girl! We go everywhere together, Alison. I've never gaddled about so much."

"You're sure you're not overdoing it, Mother?"

"Goodness me, a few fashion shows and a couple of theatres—that's not likely to exhaust me, is it?"

"But you will be careful to get enough rest, now won't you? I'll be able to get home to see you tomorrow."

When she opened the front door that Friday she heard strange voices in the sitting-room; a business-like woman with a tape measure was talking to Sylvia while they turned over the materials in a heavy bound pattern book.

"You're just in time, Alison. Which of these three do you prefer?"

Alison went to look at the book. "What for? Prefer for what?"

"New loose covers, of course. I rather like this one, but the pattern is rather large."

"Mother," Alison began in alarm. Then she beckoned her out of earshot of the third party. "Mother, this is the first I've heard of loose covers. What's wrong with the old ones?"

"They're still all right, I suppose, but they're a bit out of date."

"Jacobean linen never goes out of date. Anyhow, where's the money coming from for new ones?"

"Your father is letting me have it. Think about it for yourself, Alison. We could hardly invite Sir Tyler Ames to a house as shabby as ours. We had to make a few changes, you must see that."

"So that's who this is for." Alison considered the idea. "I suppose it could be an improvement to have new loose covers. But those materials you're looking at are awfully expensive."

"Nonsense. As Yvonne says, it's cheaper in the end to get the best."

"Where is Yvonne, by the way?"

"She had a lunch date and then she was going on to do some shopping."

"A lunch date with Sir Tyler?"

"No, with Gregg. She hasn't let Sir Tyler know she's arrived in London yet. As she says, we need time to get the house smartened up before he comes."

"It seems a lot of trouble to go to for the dull old business man she described."

"Dull old business man? What on earth are you talking about? Yvonne says he's the most charming man—well-informed and likeable. And now I must get back to the loose covers or that upholstress will think I've decided not to have any. Which pattern did you say you preferred?"

Alison's father arrived home for tea as the upholstress was just going. Soon after him came Yvonne, laden with parcels. "Oh, I've had such an exhausting afternoon!" she cried. "But never mind, I found a lampshade the exact colour we wanted, Aunt Sylvia." She produced it for inspection—a very handsome shade with the label of an expensive store.

Alison would have liked to ask how much it cost but held her tongue. If her father had supplied money for a few additions to the décor, it wasn't her place to interfere. All the same, before she left for the hospital she found a chance to say diffidently, "I hope Mother isn't going to get carried away by her renovations, Dad. You'll be keeing an eye on the expense, I suppose?"

"Certainly, certainly. But as Yvonne says, it's got to be done. Having Ames here to dinner is the least we can do."

"I'm not really quite clear about how we stand with him. Is this a business dinner?"

"I suppose to some extent, it is. But really I regard it as a step towards getting poor old Harold's music published. After all he was my brother, and I ought to do something to preserve his memory. Besides, as Yvonne so shrewdly says, Ames could be a useful business contact to me. It's always worth while knowing important people."

Her next visit to her home brought a further shock. Decorators were at work in the two reception-rooms. They grinned at her cheerfully when she exclaimed in astonishment, and told her the lady of the house had retreated upstairs with some mending to be out of their way.

She found her mother in Yvonne's bedroom, stitching a new set of buttons on a dress. "You never told me you were

having all this work done," she began, trying not to let it be an accusation.

"Well, they only started today, dear. Anyhow, I'm sure I told you we were having the house smartened up."

"But I never realized how big the scheme was. Don't tell me Dad gave you enough to pay for all this?"

"He hasn't actually given me the money yet, dear. He told me to go ahead and let him have the bills when they came in."

"Did he realize how much you were going to have done?"

"He told me to do what I liked within reason, so long as the house would look nice for when Tyler came."

"Tyler!" echoed Alison with irritation. "Every time that man's name is mentioned, it's as an excuse for spending money!"

"That's a very niggardly way of looking at things, dear," said her mother. "And in any case, if your father as head of the family thinks the expense justified, I don't really see why you should complain."

Alison was silenced. She didn't remind her mother, as she might have done, that in times gone by no financial outlay would ever have been undertaken without Alison's approval after a full discussion; her parents used to be the first to agree that she had the head for figures in the family. Now, it seemed, Yvonne had taken over her role. She reproached herself for the feeling of resentment that sprang up within her.

Worried, she made the trip to the printing works to speak to her father alone about it. She mentioned that she'd already been home, seen the workmen stripping the walls of the empty sitting-room. "What sort of estimate did they send in?" she ventured.

"I really couldn't say. I'm leaving it to Yvonne and your mother," he replied.

"But someone ought to keep an eye on costs, surely?"

"Yvonne will do that. She's very well organized, you know. Everything she plans goes like clockwork."

"But is she aware of the financial limitations? I don't want to sound carping or critical, but that's two hundred pounds worth of painting and decorating they're starting on, at a guess."

"I've got some money put by," he returned. "I should think it'll cover all the outlay and still leave a bit over."

"But, Dad—! That's the money for the new printing press!"

"Oh, the old one will keep going a while longer—at least until I get the money saved up again. If I do get any increased business through contacts from knowing Ames, I should be able to make good the expense."

It was possible he was right, but Alison couldn't help but be anxious over the turn events were taking in her family. Her anxiety must have shown in her face, for in the hospital dining-room that evening Gregg came over to speak to her. It was the first time they had seen each other outside the ward since Yvonne's arrival two weeks or so ago.

"Why so pensive?" he inquired. "Thinking about where to go for the summer holidays?"

"That's all settled. I've booked for a tour of Italy with Mary Sallis—remember her?—she used to be on Gynie."

"You really look a bit as if you could do with your holiday. When do you come off your turn of night duty?"

"At the end of the month. I'm hoping it ends before the great dinner party for Sir Tyler Ames, so that I can stay to the end and see him in all his glory."

Gregg smiled tolerantly. "He sounds an influential old boy. It's rather sweet of Yvonne to be so anxious about her father's piano pieces. Ever heard them?"

"No, are they any good?"

"Not in my opinion. Poor Sir Tyler will find he's been wined and dined and made to sign on the dotted line for scraps of music that will never make any money. But maybe he's one of these high-minded old boys who has so much money he can inflict screechy music on us if he wants to."

"I don't think he's so frightfully old," Alison countered. "From Mother I got the impression he was quite spry and debonair—more the man-about-town than the bore-about-music."

"She's got hold of the wrong end of the stick," Gregg chuckled.

"Sweet though your mother is, she's a bit vague. Why, I remember Yvonne telling me he was old enough to be her father."

When Alison came home on the evening of the great dinner party the house in Crownham Square was a picture. Nothing could have brought home more strongly to Alison the difference that Yvonne's coming had made.

A month of constant activity had resulted in the complete transformation of the downstairs rooms. Not only new paper and paint, but new curtains, new pelmets, new light fittings, new carpets and rugs. Quite a lot of her mother's old furniture seemed to have gone, giving an impression of space and elegance. Those pieces that remained were the best—an early Victorian sideboard which had belonged to Sylvia's great-aunt, a marble-topped hall table which had a surprising air of splendour when used as a base for a profuse display of carnations.

The carnations and other flowers so beautifully arranged and set throughout the house could only have been the work of a highly skilled—and highly paid—professional. Alison had long ago given up trying to estimate the cost of the changes and improvements; once, after a great deal of soul-searching, she nerved herself to mention to her cousin that the bills would be high. Yvonne had looked at her with eyes in which there was some disdainful reproach, and said, "Are you always so excessively *careful* about money, Alison?"

This had reduced Alison to the role of a tongue-tied bystander. To be continually told by all the members of her family that she was stingy and unadventurous was very upsetting. She still felt Yvonne was wrong to involve them in this expense, but she no longer had the confidence to voice her objections—and partly because she was afraid the objections were rooted in her own jealousy and envy. She struggled hard against the growing resentment and distrust she felt for her cousin, because she could so easily be deceiving herself about Yvonne's intentions.

She had intended to help her mother with last-minute preparations for the dinner and arrived in time to do so, but found a stranger in control of the kitchen. "I'm from the Epicure Home

Catering Service," said this neatly uniformed and efficient woman. "Your mother is upstairs dressing."

When she tapped on Sylvia's door it was opened by a gorgeous figure in a short evening dress of hyacinth blue velvet. "Do you like it, darling?" her mother said anxiously. "Yvonne helped me choose it so I know it's lovely really, but I do feel strange with all this expanse of bare shoulder."

"Mother, you look marvellous!" Alison cried vehemently. In that moment she could almost believe the whole thing was worth while to see Sylvia looking ten years younger, with a sparkle in her eyes and the flush of excitement in her cheeks.

"Really? Do you like my hair? Yvonne took me to the man who does her hair in town. Look, dear, should I wear a necklace to disguise all this space here?"

Alison chuckled. "That'll only draw attention to it. If you really feel uncomfortable about the neckline, why don't you wear a stole?"

"Now why didn't I think of that? I'll wear that pretty lace one your father gave me last Christmas." She was searching for it as Alison turned to go. "Alison, you won't mind, will you, but I bought you a dress too."

"Good heavens, what next?"

"Well, darling, everybody else was going to have new—even Dad's got a new dinner jacket—and after all this is such a special occasion, because we never have had a titled person to dinner before, and anyhow I saw this dress in the shop—just the kind of thing you like and just your size, and nice and simple so that it'll always be useful . . ."

Alison recognized only too well that unquenchable bright chatter. It was the way Sylvia always went on when she was trying to excuse some tremendous extravagance. Alison hurried to her own room to find, laid across her bed, the new dress—an elegant slip of a thing in vivid green ottoman silk. When she looked at its maker's label, she caught her breath.

Her first impulse was to try it on at once. Her second was to put it safely away in her wardrobe until it could be returned to

the boutique. Since when had her family been able to afford presents of this sort for casual occasions? She appreciated from her heart her mother's desire to see her suitably clad for this big moment, but quite a big slice of the money her father had put by must have gone on that dress alone.

She sank down on the end of the bed, one hand lightly touching the slippery ribbed surface of the skirt. It was so beautiful! She'd love to wear it; and surely if she didn't, her mother would be hurt and offended? Moreover, even if she put it straight in her wardrobe now, could she persuade Sylvia to return it? Would the boutique accept it and return the money?

No, there was small chance of getting her father's money back. It was gone for good. "I only hope something substantial comes Dad's way from this meeting with the great Sir Tyler," she told her reflection in the wardrobe mirror. "But I don't really see how it can . . ."

Time was getting on. She set about getting ready, and with real satisfaction slipped at last into the most expensive gown that had ever covered her slim figure. It fitted her to perfection. She smoothed her honey-brown hair again, put on pearl ear studs and the matching necklace her parents had given her for her twenty-first. Her mirror told her she looked shinningly cool and well-groomed, and into her mind darted a thought: "I'm nearly as pretty as Yvonne." At once colour came to her cheeks. Was her entire outlook to be dominated by the fact that her cousin was more beautiful and more popular than she was herself?

As she was coming downstairs, she saw Yvonne cross the hall. Seen from above she looked like a shaft of captive sunlight. Her dress was utterly simple—a sheath of softness to grace her tiny figure. It was the fabric that made it so wonderful, a golden tissue light and fine as a whisper. She wore no jewellery and needed none. Nothing could have added richness to what was already as rare as rainbow gold. Above the dress her hair was a paler echo of the same colour; the blue of her eyes was thus like sapphire among gold.

"But there are six places laid, Aunt Sylvia," she was saying in

perplexity to Alison's mother as Alison reached the dining-room.

"Of course, dear. There are going to be six people at dinner."

"You and Uncle Eric, Tyler and I, and Alison. I make that five."

"Scatterbrain, you've forgotten Gregg."

"Gregg?" Was it Alison's imagination or did a note of asperity sharpen Yvonne's voice. "But Gregg hasn't been invited."

"Yes he has. My dear girl," Sylvia said in alarm, "do you mean you didn't intend to ask him?"

"I certainly did not."

"But why not? You've been such good pals, I took it for granted—"

"When I wrote to Tyler I said it would be just the family. Gregg isn't part of the family."

"You should have told me, my dear," Sylvia said with contrition. "I simply thought you'd overlooked the matter, what with all the rush of the last minute preparations. So I rang him yesterday to make sure he was coming—"

"You did *what*?"

"It's too late to put him off now—he'll be on his way by this time. Besides, he said he particularly wanted to meet Tyler."

"He said that?" Yvonne asked with sudden alarm. "Did he say why?"

"You know how he makes fun. He said he'd heard two entirely different descriptions of Tyler and he wanted to find out which was correct."

"Two descriptions! Who else has been talking to him about Tyler? Did you?"

"No, I don't remember ever doing so until yesterday on the phone. When he said that, I said Tyler was reported to be awfully nice and he said he'd be interested to find out *how* nice."

Alison saw that her cousin was really annoyed, and intervened to save her mother from blame. "I believe it was from me that Gregg first got that character sketch. He referred to him as a 'dull old stick' or some such phrase, and I mentioned that I'd heard otherwise. But I was only repeating what you yourself had told Mother, so I don't see that it matters."

Yvonne gave her a darting scrutiny, then smiled negligently. "No, of course it doesn't really matter. But how are we going to account for his presence to Tyler when I said it would be only the family?"

"We can say he's a friend and colleague of Alison's," Sylvia suggested.

"So we can."

Gregg was ushered in by the catering firm's waitress while Alison's father was sampling the sherry. When he met Alison at the sitting-room door his glance showed first surprise, and then appreciation. He was about to say something to her, but the compliment died into silence as his eyes rested for the first time that evening on Yvonne. He walked past Alison, almost blindly, to take Yvonne's outstretched hand.

"You look like a beautiful little gold and ivory statuette," he said. "Every time I see you you look lovelier. I was going to be very angry with you for keeping me in suspense about tonight, but how can I be when you take my breath away like this?"

She smiled. "Lucky Aunt Sylvia thought to ring you," she said. "I quite took it for granted you were coming. We'd have been one short at dinner if you hadn't been here."

Listening, Alison wondered whether to call that the polite covering-up of an awkwardness or a downright falsehood. Out of the corner of her eye she studied her cousin; her face was bland and innocent.

Gregg had taken up position by the window, one hand holding the sherry Eric had just brought him, the other twitching aside the brand-new curtain.

"What on earth are you doing?" demanded Yvonne.

"I want to see whether this wealthy musical baronet rolls up in a Rolls Royce or a Bentley."

"You are an idiot," was her laughing reply.

But Gregg maintained his place. And it seemed to Alison that there was more than idle interest in his eyes as they scanned the square.

Yvonne, too, seemed alert and watchful. She didn't come to the

window; she drifted with apparent lack of purpose towards the sitting-room door.

"Well, well, well!" said Gregg. "Who'd have believed it. An American Fairlane, no less!" He turned to share his surprise with Yvonne, but Yvonne had already darted to the hall.

Afterwards Alison wondered if she had intended to get her greeting to Tyler over before Gregg could see it. But the catering firm's waitress was answering the door, and by the time Tyler had given up his hat to her and turned to Yvonne, the rest of the party were close enough to the sitting-room door to witness it.

Tyler was a tall man, so tall than in an attempt to minimize his height he had somewhere along his thirty-eight-or-nine years developed a slight stoop. His face had the amiable, trusting smile that goes with a warm but placid temperament. He was not unhandsome, with crinkles round his eyes and greying brown hair of the type that insists on growing in a series of very small, crisp waves; but he lacked that incisiveness that to Alison set the seal on good looks.

He stepped forward. Yvonne, standing on tiptoe, kissed him on both cheeks in the French fashion. It wasn't a lover's kiss. But Tyler's reaction to it was more tender and affectionate than would have befitted a mere business friend. He would have held her closer and let her go later, but shyness seemed to hold him back.

Yvonne freed herself and stepped back. Tyler retained her hands and surveyed her with a face so full of entranced approval that to Alison it was a complete betrayal of his feelings.

Her glance went sharply to Gregg, to see what he thought. Then she realised that Yvonne, by some miracle, had so placed herself that Gregg couldn't get a clear view of Tyler's face.

But nevertheless, Gregg was jealous.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN later days Alison often wondered what would have happened if the phone hadn't rung just then. It was a call for Gregg, urgently summoning him to the hospital for an emergency operation. An introduction was hastily performed, and then Gregg had to hurry away.

The rest of the party were then introduced more at leisure. "Ah, you're at the same hospital as Mr. Danton, then?" Tyler queried. "Is he often summoned away at such short notice?"

"Oh yes, poor Alison, and poor Gregg—they lead a life of slavery," cried Yvonne.

This seemed to tie Gregg and Alison together somehow, in friendship at least and perhaps more; that at least was how Tyler interpreted it. "She's explained away Gregg to Tyler," Alison said to herself. "Now all she's got to do is explain away Tyler to Gregg—but that won't be so easy."

She proved to be mistaken in this. A few days later, taking time off from the rounds to swallow a scalding cup of tea in the ward kitchen, Gregg asked casually, "Is old Grandpa Tyler inviting your family to a return dinner?"

"Not that I've heard of," she replied. "I hope he does, though. He lives in one of those fabulous bachelor flats off Piccadilly."

"He would. Didn't he just strike you that way? A real old dedicated bachelor, as Yvonne so aptly christened him."

"If he was a dedicated bachelor he could hardly be '*Grandpa Tyler*,'" Alison said with some asperity, for she had found him a likeable man.

"So-o-o. He's your type, is he? The suave, cultured music publisher with a title and a big income."

"Well, I like him," she objected, although smiling at his banter. "So do my parents."

"Oh, so do I. Allow me to join the chorus. So do I. He must be

a decent old stick, offering to practically adopt Yvonne the way he did."

"He did that?" Alison asked in surprise. "I hadn't heard that."

"Oh, well, she didn't have to take him up on it because luckily she has your father and mother to fall back on. But I believe Tyler feels such a fatherly affection for her he was willing to take on the job of guardian if need be."

Alison felt sure that if this had been so Yvonne would have mentioned it at home. She couldn't help feeling that the whole tale was a way of disposing of Tyler's all-too-obvious affection for her.

She was no longer on night duty, so wasn't able to drop in on her family during the day. She had evening engagements of her own several times—dates with other nurses, one date with the brother of one of her patients of former days, and a long promised visit to Mary Sallis, the girl with whom she hoped to go to Italy. So it was nearly a fortnight before she was able to call in at Crownham Square to spend an evening with her family.

Her mother had already told her on the telephone that they were having friends in for cocktails, a form of entertainment that surprised Alison; most of the Blakelocks' friends were of the kind you invite for something more substantial than canapés and sausages on sticks.

But when she saw the people assembled in the downstairs rooms she understood at once. With the exception of Tyler, they were all strangers to Alison. To her father too, it seemed, for he was scarcely able to put a name to one of them when she inquired.

Had she known the kind of party it would be she would have worn the elegant new green dress instead of the lightweight two-piece which now made her feel so desperately out of place.

"It's to celebrate the publication of the piano pieces," Yvonne explained when at last Alison found herself close to her. "Most of these people are music-lovers. Look, over there, that's Lady Delavant—she goes to all the opera first nights. And that's

Johnnie Staffs-Cownan and his wife—they're taking me to the Midnight Charity Matinée in aid of the Musician's Association later on."

"Is Gregg here?" Alison inquired, her eyes searching the room for him. "He's a music-lover."

"Unfortunately he's on duty."

"He's not," Allison said flatly.

"Isn't he? I thought he was."

"If I'd known, I could have brought him with me."

"It's just as well you didn't," Yvonne said slowly. "If you remember, soon after I first met him I said he was fun to be with but that the time would come when perhaps I shouldn't be able to see him so often."

"I remember something like that. Is that why you didn't invite him for tonight? Are you trying to shake him off?"

"No!" Yvonne said with unexpected vehemence. "No, I don't *want* to do that."

Alison was taken aback, and her face showed it. Yvonne frowned and took a sip of her drink. "Oh dear," she said more lightly, "why is life so difficult? Why does one get fond of people?"

There was no answer to that. Someone came up to say that they ought to be leaving for the matinée, and the party began to break up. Behind them they left that indescribable debris which breaks the heart of the hostess. Alison found her mother surveying it with distaste.

"You go and put your feet up, Mother. I'll clear this up."

"But my dear Alison, after all this is your time off. You oughtn't to be doing extra work—"

"Neither ought you!" Alison firmly took the tray her mother was holding and began clearing the dirty glasses. With the deft movements characteristic of the nurse she moved quickly about the littered room, reducing it to order. The next job was to wash the glasses. Her father, always disinclined for domestic tasks, unwillingly undertook to stack the glasses ready for putting them away.

"Dad, can't you put a bit of a brake on mother's activities?" she

asked worriedly. "She's looking paler than she used to, and I'm sure she's not getting enough rest."

Eric breathed on a glass and polished it. "You've got to realize," he said, "that when a new member is adopted into the family it's bound to involve a bit of extra work."

"I don't see that at all. A girl of Yvonne's age could do all her own chores, especially when she's at home all the time and not out at work. And speaking of that, when is Yvonne going to find a job?"

"Now don't be unreasonable," Eric urged. "She's got to be given time to find her feet and settle down. Two months isn't so very long."

"It's a longer holiday than I've ever had, or you either," Alison said grimly.

Eric picked up a trayful of glasses and walked gingerly towards the door with them. There he paused and turned.

"What's the matter with you these days?" he asked, his broad face tight with disapproval. "You're turning into a regular killjoy!"

He had never spoken to Alison like that in her life before, and it shocked her more than she would ever have admitted. Was it true, then? Was she growing spiteful and mean-spirited, simply because someone else had taken first place in the hearts of those she loved?

She went into the sitting-room to see how her mother was feeling. Sylvia was sitting at her bureau, looking at some papers which she hastily put away at Alison's entrance. Her face was grey with weariness.

"Wouldn't you like to go up to bed?" suggested Alison, gently coaxing. "You really look all in, Mother. I'll bring you up some supper in a little while—would you like that?"

Dispiritedly her mother got up. "I think I will go to bed," she agreed. "But I don't want anything to eat. I really think I'll drop off to sleep the moment my head touches the pillow."

Alison prepared a snack supper for her father and herself about an hour later, and tiptoed upstairs to see if Sylvia was still awake. The room was in darkness. Closing the door again softly, Alison was about to go as she'd come when she heard her name called.

"Yes?" she said, going in again. "Changed your mind about supper?"

Sylvia half sat up in bed and switched on her bedside lamp. "Come in a minute, Alison. There's something I'd like to ask you."

Alison came further into the room, so that her features were visible in the dim light from the bedside lamp. "Fire away."

"Well, it's like this, dear. I—er—I'm afraid I'm in a bit of a scrape and I need your help. I don't really like to ask you, but—well—the fact is—"

"Go on," Alison prompted, taking Sylvia's hot, embarrassed hand in her own cool one.

"I'm terribly in debt, Alison. Can you lend me some money?"

CHAPTER FIVE

ALISON was used to appeals for a loan. But these usually came when the month's housekeeping was about to run out with the end of the month still a few days off. Tonight's appeal must imply something more important than a slight shortage of ready cash.

She sat down on the side of her mother's bed. "I haven't got very much in my bag," she remarked. "Only a couple of pounds. Would that be enough?"

Her mother made a little sound that, though it was half a laugh, held more hysteria than mirth. "Nothing like enough, Alison. I haven't a penny left for the month's expenses, with three weeks still to go. And not only that—"

"Is it any use asking where it's gone?"

"Well, dear, wines and spirits are frightfully expensive, you see. And then there were the ingredients for the cocktail canapés—I suppose I shouldn't have bought smoked salmon, but I wanted everything to be nice. On top of that there were the new wineglasses. I could see they would look trashy if I bought the cheap ones, so I . . . Well, anyhow, that's where the month's money has gone, mostly. But it isn't only that."

"Go on," Alison prompted carefully. The least note of criticism in her voice, she knew from experience, would send her mother off into floods of tears.

"The fact is, dear, there's rather a big electric light bill that ought to be paid."

"But surely that isn't so urgent," Alison demurred. "It's only May—the quarter's bill only came in last month, surely?"

Sylvia cleared her throat. "Well, dear . . . As a matter of fact, this is the previous quarter's bill. Honestly, Alison, I had the money mostly put by, the way you always say I should. I was *going* to pay it. But then Yvonne wrote from Marseilles to say she was coming and there were some things we needed for her room.

After that there were little expenses I hadn't bargained for . . . It's rather a big bill, dear. And if we don't pay, I dare say they'll cut off the electricity."

Alison bit her lip. "What does Dad say about this?"

"I—well—I haven't told him." Sylvia's fingers tightened round Alison's hand. "You know how cross he can get sometimes. He's had worries of his own, recently, what with paying that big bill for redecorations."

"The redecorations are all paid for?" Alison queried warily. "You paid the painters and the upholstery firm?"

"Oh, yes dear, of course I did. You can see the receipts for yourself, if you like."

"But there isn't any money left over to help out on the other bills?"

"I only wish there were! It's quite the other way about, though. I've had to use the housekeeping to pay for one or two items—the new lampshades, for instance, and ashtrays. So because of that I've had to get one or two things on credit from Marrots—"

"Mother, you didn't!"

"Oh, there's nothing so bad in that. Mr. Marrot doesn't mind waiting for his money and after all I've been buying my groceries there for years."

Alison began to have the feeling that the more she cross-examined, the worse she would find the state of the household affairs. A rare, cold anger began to rise within her. After all these years of struggle to bring some sort of order into her mother's muddled finances—!

"Those papers you put away in such a hurry when I came into the sitting-room," she suggested. "Were they by any chance unpaid bills?"

"No, of course not. At least," Sylvia amended, "not all of them. Quite a lot are paid."

"But quite a lot aren't? How many? How big a sum?"

"Now Alison—there's no need to be so put out. It's only a temporary shortage. Once your father gets a good run of orders, he'll—"

"If he got a good run of orders ten to one he'd work that poor old machine to death. But the money to replace it has all been thrown away on new curtains and paint and wallpaper."

"You can't say it's been thrown away," Sylvia objected. "The house is a picture, you must admit. We couldn't have invited Tyler and his friends here while it was in that awful shabby state."

"Why not? Good heavens, Tyler is so head over heels in love with Yvonne that he hardly notices her surroundings."

"He is, isn't he? So really, you see, we had to spend the money on the house. Yvonne would have been ashamed to ask him here otherwise and that would have been a pity, because I really feel something may come of it though he is a little old for her."

"Mother, we're not discussing Tyler's romantic feelings, we're discussing the family finances. Exactly how much money do you need?"

"I don't exactly know, dear. Rather a lot, I'm afraid. But the only bill that's really urgent is the electric light. It could be so embarrassing to have it cut off."

"Will you look at the bills over the week-end and let me know on Monday how much it comes to? I can't come before then—I'm not free. But I'll come Monday evening. By then you and Dad can have had a talk—"

"Oh, no, Alison, really, I don't want to bring your father into it."

"Look here, you've got to show a bit of sense—"

"Oh, if you're going to take that tone with me," her mother said in affront, "I'd rather not have your help."

"And have the electric light cut off?"

She was sorry as soon as she'd said it, because she knew her mother would begin to cry. There was nothing she could do after that except apologize, and soothe her with promises of all the help she could muster. At last she said goodnight and went downstairs, stopping for only a brief word with her father before leaving immediately for the nurses' home. She had the impression that her father would have liked a chat; he may even have wanted an opportunity to make amends for calling her "killjoy". But she was

too preoccupied to stay talking, and too short of time if she were to get in before the door was locked.

Throughout most of the week-end she worried over the problem. She tried to make a mental inventory of all the unusual expenses that had arisen since Yvonne came: the redecorations, the new rugs and carpets, the food and the hire of a waitress for Tyler's first visit, the new dresses for herself and her mother on that occasion, the flowers, the wines—and how many other things she knew nothing about?

The more she thought about it the more it worried her. She had some savings, intended for the holiday jaunt to Italy. But she doubted if she had enough to meet the bills.

She was very angry, but chiefly with herself. She had shirked her responsibilities, simply because she had been hurt by the way her family had turned away from her to the new bright star in their firmament. She tended to be jealous of Yvonne, and to shield herself from the crime of jealousy she had withdrawn from the struggle of dealing with the family problems.

Her mother wasn't to blame. She had always been muddle-headed where money was concerned. Knowing her as she did, Alison should have stood guard over her and not abandoned her to the dictates of a thoughtless self-centred girl like Yvonne.

Yes, thoughtless and self-centred—she allowed herself to frame the verdict and with her conscious mind accept it. Any girl who turned a household topsy-turvy in the way Yvonne had done, anyone so careless with other people's money, so determined on having things entirely to suit herself, could only be described as thoughtless and self-centred.

Yet no one else seemed to see her in that light. Sylvia appeared to attach no blame to Yvonne for the mess she was in. Alison's father was just as blind and tolerant. Gregg, who might have felt the prick of suspicion over the coming of Tyler, was now perfectly convinced everything was as Yvonne represented it.

Only Alison saw any flaw. Once Alison had shrunk from having to reach an unfavourable verdict, but each successive event had pushed her towards the same conclusion. Now she thought it

over, it seemed likely Yvonne had only chosen to come to live with them because she thought the Blakelocks were rich, and among their friends she would find a rich husband. When she learned her mistake it was too late to cancel the decision: but, as she herself had put it, "there's always Tyler". Now the household had to be made fit to receive Tyler—never mind if the cost broke the household finances. What would happen in the end Alison couldn't foresee. She thought that her cousin was finding that her plan was more difficult than she'd expected because of an unwanted, unnecessary affection that had sprung up between herself and Gregg. Poor Yvonne, to see her neatly laid plans go astray because she couldn't control her own heart.

This sardonic anger lingered in Alison's mind, so that when Gregg strolled into her ward on Monday morning and began to chat amiably about her cousin, she was terse with him.

"My, my," observed Gregg, "aren't we in a crab-apple mood today! What's the matter with you?"

"I'm just feeling that all the rest of the world is silly, and I'm the only one with any sense. It's a common delusion."

"How true," he murmured. "But it's odd to find you suffering from it. Perhaps you've been overworking. How about coming out for a little light relief this evening?"

She all but stared. "With you?"

"Why not?"

"Haven't you got a date with Yvonne?"

"Should I be asking you if I had?"

"Obviously not," she said with two-edged truth. "What's the matter? Is she out with her upper crust friends tonight?"

Gregg went red. "That's not very nice, Alison."

"But she *is* going out elsewhere. So you feel you'll do a little slumming and take me out instead."

"For heaven's sake—"

"Well, thanks for the offer, but I have to go home and settle a family problem tonight."

Gregg drew back. "You ought to think where you're going," he said. "I realize that Yvonne has made a difference to your life

—attracted away some of the love you used to have all to yourself from your parents. But don't let envy make you sour and narrow-minded, Alison."

He walked off, disapproval in every line of his tall figure. Cookie edged up to Alison. "You and he seemed awfully cool with each other," she remarked. "Anything wrong?"

"Does it matter?"

"I'd have said it did, to you. You're a fool, Alison. You'll drive him away."

"It's already happened," Alison said sadly.

CHAPTER SIX

IF Alison's emotions had been bleak before, condemnation from Gregg of all people was calculated to render them desolate. She admitted that she had brought his censure on herself by her display of petulant bad manners—but the fact that she only had herself to blame for his displeasure only made matters worse.

As she headed for Crownham Square she felt sober and determined. The expressed disapproval of her father, of Gregg, and even of her own mother towards her view of life couldn't change her determination on this one thing. No matter how much of a killjoy she might appear, she intended to set the family budget back on the right road and make sure it stayed there.

Yvonne was indoors, playing canasta with her Uncle Eric.

"Hullo, I thought you were going out," Alison remarked.

"So I am, later on. I'm just doing this to fill in time until Tyler arrives to collect me."

Alison nodded and asked for her mother.

"In the kitchen, I believe," said her father. "She said she was expecting you this evening, Alison."

The kitchen was Sylvia's usual place of refuge whenever the outside world looked threatening. Here, the scene of so many culinary triumphs (she was an excellent if extravagant cook), she felt on surer ground, and would find consolation in baking and icing a cake or experimenting with a new recipe.

But no savoury smells greeted Alison when she opened the door. Sylvia wasn't engaged in cookery; she was doing some ironing.

"For heaven's sake, Mother!" Alison exclaimed. "By seven in the evening shouldn't you be sitting down relaxing?"

"I usually am, dear. But it just happens that Yvonne wants this evening skirt to change into before Tyler arrives. He's taking

her to dinner somewhere special. This skirt's got a bit creased in the wardrobe."

Alison surveyed the navy blue taffeta skirt spread on the ironing board. It was short but voluminous, a creation of dozens of unpressed pleats consisting of about ten or twelve yards of material. Her mother was very lightly sponging each section on the wrong side and pressing it delicately inch by inch, so as not to mark it with the iron. She was bent over her work, her brow furrowed with concentration and her eyes screwed wearily to note the results on the dark, shining fabric.

And as she looked at the scene, Alison's patience was suddenly at an end.

With an angry gesture she flicked the electric switch off. Her mother looked over her shoulder. "Don't switch off, darling, there's a lot still to do."

"Not for you, there isn't." She took the iron out of her mother's hand, banged it down on the stand, twitched the skirt off the ironing board, and swept out of the kitchen with it.

Straight into the sitting-room she stalked, the taffeta trailing beside her in a whispering rustle of silk. Her mother came at her heels exclaiming "Alison! Alison, what are you doing? *Alison!*"

She walked up to the card table and dropped the skirt at Yvonne's feet. "Here," she observed coldly, "if you want to wear that tonight, press it for yourself."

Yvonne sat back in her chair, staring at her. "What's the matter?" she gasped.

"Yvonne, my dear, I'm sorry! I don't know what's got into her—"

"Then I'll tell you!" Alison broke in. "I took up residence at the hospital so as to ease the burden of housework on you. Then I come home and find you slaving over Yvonne's belongings at an hour when you should have finished for the day. And what's Yvonne doing? Sitting in comfort at the card table, like a princess in a parlour. Well, it's got to stop. You're not her lady's maid and she's perfectly capable of looking after her own clothes."

"But, Alison, she's not been used to—"

"Then the sooner she gets used to it, the better. Look at you—you've got dark circles under your eyes and hardly a scrap of colour in your face. Dad, what have you been thinking of to let her overtire herself like this?"

"Well, really, Alison, I think your mother is old enough to organize her own affairs—"

"Organize? The only person in this house who knows how to organize is Yvonne, and she's arranged things so that she gets everything done without ever raising a finger."

"But Aunt Sylvia offered—"

"And you should have refused," Alison said bluntly. "Anybody with an ounce of common decency would refuse to be waited on by a tired woman who's got a house to run."

"But I like to do things for her," pleaded Sylvia.

"That only makes it the more imperative for Yvonne to refuse to allow you."

"I think you're being rather hard on me, Alison," faltered Yvonne. "You might have come to me in private instead of making a scene like this."

"I came to you in private. Remember? The first morning you woke in this house? I asked you to prevent Mother from doing too much for you, and you promised you would. And I've hinted and hinted, but it's had no effect. I think you just haven't wanted to understand."

"This is no way to speak to someone we've taken in and tried to make welcome," Eric said angrily.

"It's the way to speak to someone who takes advantage of our hospitality."

"My hospitality," her father corrected her. "I'd like to remind you this is my house—"

"Then why don't you deal with its problems?" she rejoined with equal heat. "You let Mother overtire herself dangerously, and you let her run herself monstrously into debt—"

"Alison!" cried Sylvia. "You promised not to speak of it."

"I promised nothing of the kind. You told me you didn't want him to know. I promised nothing. If the family is ever to be

solvent again, Dad as head of it must look into the money troubles. Then we must all help to clear them up—and that includes Yvonne."

"What's this about debts?" Eric asked, going rather white under his pink complexion. "It's the first I've heard of it. Sylvia, you haven't got into debt again?"

Sylvia sank down on the nearest chair. "It isn't so very bad, dear—"

"Dad, it's no good turning on her accusingly. You've been in this house and you must have known she didn't have the money to pay for half the things that came into it."

"Where are the bills, Sylvia?"

"In the bureau drawer, Eric."

He went to get them. Yvonne rose and gathered up the taffeta skirt. "I'd better go and finish pressing this," she said timidly. "Tyler will be here soon."

"Sit down," Alison said. "We're going to have a family conference, and as you're part of the family, you're involved."

"I'm perfectly willing to do anything I can," Yvonne said, her voice breaking. "Don't be so cross with me, Alison."

"Yes, don't be so bad-tempered and cross, Alison. If there's any money owing, getting into a paddy won't help." Eric was turning away from the bureau, the sheaf of bills in his hand. "I think you ought to leave Yvonne out of it. It's really none of her business."

"Think not?" She took the bills from him and flicked one or two over. Soon she came to what she expected to find. "Here's a bill for a dress from a firm called Boutique Madeline. Here's another. Here's one for shoes and nylons at Brown and Gleddow's—"

"But the girl's got to have clothes, Alison."

"Then why doesn't she go out and earn the money to pay for them?"

If she'd suggested they should rob the Bank of England to get the money she couldn't have roused more horror.

"What on earth do you mean?" Sylvia cried. "You're not suggesting Yvonne should take a job?"

"Why not?"

"But I should miss her terribly!"

"What could she do? She's not trained for anything."

"She could get training. Almost any firm will train a suitable applicant these days."

"But she wasn't brought up to work for her living," wailed Sylvia.

"It's never too late to mend, Mother. She'll learn."

The doorbell rang. Sylvia, glad of an excuse to get away from unpleasant realities, hurried off to answer it.

"That'll be Tyler," Eric said gruffly. "We'd best leave this until some other time."

"All right," Alison replied. "As long as it's clearly understood that tonight ends Yvonne's existence as an expensive but unproductive decoration. I think it's time she stopped enjoying herself—"

A sound behind her made her turn her head. Gregg was standing in the sitting-room doorway.

"A charming sentiment," he said, ironical disdain curving his expressive mouth.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALISON was stricken to stone at finding him staring at her with so much incredulous dislike. Yvonne, with a little muffled sound of distress, made for the door.

"Wait a minute, Yvonne," Gregg said, preventing her from going. "I'm sure Alison will take that back when she thinks about it."

Yvonne shook her head. Her great eyes were swimming in tears. "You don't know," she said brokenly. "Everything I do is wrong, according to Alison."

"But she doesn't really mean it—"

"Let me go, Gregg. I can't stay in the room a minute longer."

He relinquished his grasp, and she went past him swiftly, to run upstairs and into her own room.

Gregg turned back to Alison. "Know why I came here this evening? To apologize for calling you sour and narrow-minded this morning. But perhaps I ought not to bother."

He wheeled and stalked out. Sylvia said tremulously, "You see how it sounds to other people, Alison? I told you you were being cross to Yvonne."

"I don't care how it sounds to other people!" Alison cried—although in her heart it wasn't true. "What concerns me is your health and the family finances. What Gregg or anyone else thinks is unimportant."

Eric had sunk down into an armchair and was leafing through the papers he had taken from the bureau drawer. He was making a rapid total of the amounts. "This is a bit steep, you know, Sylvia," he put in. "I'm not saying I entirely agree with Alison's choice of time and place for a showdown, but really, these bills . . . There won't be enough left to cover these out of that money I gave you."

His wife glanced at him and away again. "No, I don't think there will."

"You might as well hear the whole story, Dad. There isn't anything left out of that money you made available to Mother."

"But—Alison—that was the savings of four years!"

"What's the use of being indignant now? You ought to have kept a check on it."

Her father went red. "I suppose I ought to be grateful to you for bringing it out into the open like this. It's clear we've been living above our income to a quite fantastic extent. I don't know how I'm ever going to be able to pay off this lot."

"I have some money put by. You can have it, but it won't go far towards that total."

"Thank you, Alison," he said lamely, going an even deeper red. "I ought to be ashamed to take your money but I don't see what else I can do." He started afresh on the bills, taking taking out his pencil to do sums in the margins.

The doorbell rang once more. "That will be Tyler," said Sylvia. On the way to the sitting-room door she touched Alison on the arm and beckoned her out to the hall. "Go upstairs and tell Yvonne you're sorry," she coaxed.

"But I'm not sorry."

"Oh, Alison! Surely you don't want to be on bad terms with your own cousin? Come along, dear—for my sake. Go up and tell her everything's all right."

"Honestly, Mother, if anyone is to apologize I think it ought to be Yvonne."

"No, no, darling. It was you who started all this unpleasantness tonight. At least go up and let her see you didn't intend to upset the poor girl so much."

Once more the doorbell rang. Rather than delay her mother any longer Alison nodded and went towards the stairs. As Tyler was admitted to the house she heard her mother say, "You won't mind waiting for Yvonne in the dining-room, I hope. My husband's engaged on some business papers in the sitting-room and I think it would be better not to disturb him."

When Yvonne opened her room door to Alison's knock, she was dressed to go out to dinner—not in the taffeta evening skirt, which still lay in a crumpled heap downstairs, but in a pretty pale blue dress of broderie anglaise.

"Tyler is waiting for you in the dining-room," Alison told her.

"But I thought I was to be kept at home to attend a family conference?"

"Is that why you changed ready to go out?"

She thought Yvonne smothered a smile. "I thought I'd better be ready, just in case. Really, it would do no good if I did stay at home. I'm no good at financial problems." She laid a placating hand on Alison's arm. "Please, Alison—you must believe me. I had no idea your mother hadn't kept her accounts straight. She didn't tell me. When I needed clothes, she just told me to go and get what I wanted. How could I possibly know she was pressed for money?"

There was enough truth in this to fill Alison with a terrible doubt. Had she been misjudging her cousin? She blushed painfully and said, "I'm sorry if I flew off the handle at you. It was just seeing Mother struggling away with so much work and looking so tired—it made me see red."

"So we're friends again?" Yvonne said, taking Alison's hand and pressing it gently.

"Yes . . . I suppose we are."

"And now I must fly! Tyler is taking me to meet friends, and we musn't be late."

Hearing her light footsteps running downstairs and her gay "Bye, Aunt Sylvia, don't wait up!" Alison began to wonder if the events of the previous hour had been imagination. But when she got to the sitting-room and found her father frowning deeply over his problems, she knew only too well how real they had been.

"I don't really think any earnings Yvonne might bring in would make much difference to this," he sighed, pushing the papers aside.

"Perhaps not. She'd probably spend nine-tenths of what she earned. But at least she'd be occupied during the day, not here at home dreaming up expensive schemes for improving the house or giving parties that exhaust Mother's energy."

"I don't know. It doesn't seem right to have to ask her."

"Why not? There's nothing shameful about having to earn your keep. She's built up this lady-of-leisure atmosphere around herself, but there's no justification for it. She's the daughter of a poor man, taken into the home of an ordinary family. Most girls would think it a duty to pay their own way."

"You think we really ought to suggest it to her?"

"I most certainly do! For Mother's sake alone—"

"But your mother doesn't want Yvonne to do it. She enjoys her companionship in the house."

Alison groaned in helpless annoyance. "We can't afford to keep her at home as a companion for Mother. Don't you understand that?"

"But if she promised to help cut down expenses? I mean, now that she understands the situation—"

"There would still be the problem of making Mother take proper care of herself. So long as Yvonne is in and around the house all day, Mother will wear herself out running round after her. You can call me sour and narrow-minded and a killjoy if you like, but for the sake of Mother's health I want Yvonne out of this house for at least six or seven hours a day, and the most sensible way to achieve that is for her to get a job."

In the end, before she left to return to the hospital, she obtained his firm promise to encourage Yvonne's embarkation on a career of some sort.

She had gained a victory, but it was an empty one. Everyone who knew her seemed to think she was unnecessarily hard on Yvonne. Even Alison herself was no longer so sure Yvonne was entirely to blame. Nobody could deny that her mother tended to conceal financial difficulties until they were beyond her power to deal with; nor that she loved to be on the go, doing

things for people she loved. Perhaps Yvonne had really been unaware of the situation as it had developed.

Through a night of fitful sleep Alison kept recalling Gregg's scornful face. It hurt her very deeply to think that he should have happened in just when she was uttering words which, taken out of their context, sounded mean-spirited and vengeful. She wanted very much to set the record straight, but how was it to be done?

The opportunity occurred next day rather unexpectedly. One of Gregg's post-operative cases had a sudden collapse, and the resources of almost the entire ward were hustled into action to save him. Meanwhile, for fear that the end was near, the man's wife was sent for—a poor, white-faced girl too near to tears to be able to speak. Alison remembered to look in on her in the ward's waiting-room with every scrap of hopeful news, and gave up her lunch break to sitting with her and talking to her.

About four o'clock the crisis was over. The patient's pulse was steady, he was sleeping quietly. Alison saw the young wife off in a taxi from the hospital doorway, and returned upstairs. Outside Huntford Ward the porters were moving the trolley of extra equipment into the lift; Gregg was standing by watching them, relief quite plain on his face that the need for the oxygen tent was past. As Allison came up he put an arm companionably round her shoulders.

"There are times," he said "when I could cheerfully strangle you. But there are others when I could hug you until you cry for mercy. Today was one of the hugging times." He gave her a momentary embrace, from which she instantly escaped.

"Conduct most unbecoming a member of the medical profession, Mr. Danton," she reproved him, while the porters grinned and pushed their trolley noisily away.

"Oh, nuts to the medical profession and its ethics. You were marvellous today. And that poor little Mrs. Grant—I should think she'll mention you in her prayers tonight."

"Gregg . . . About last night . . ."

He rubbed his face wearily and sighed. "Alison, I'm sorry

I said what I did. But I can't help being a bit shocked at what I heard. The girl who was the soul of kindness to Mrs. Grant today hardly seems the same girl I heard last night."

"It probably sounded awful. I was angry with Yvonne, I don't mind admitting it. I don't want to go into details, because our family difficulties are no concern of yours, but when you came in last night I was just declaring that I thought it was time Yvonne got a job."

Gregg stared at her. "Was that all it was?"

"Yes, that was all. It doesn't seem so awful to me, and if I'd had a chance to explain maybe it wouldn't have seemed so awful to you either."

"—Oh my hat! And I thought you were just begrudging the poor girl her gay times and her friends. I am sorry, Alison. I ought to have known better."

She found she was smiling at him almost fondly, and at once took herself in hand. "I'm sorry too, for the way I spoke to you the other day when you asked me out."

"To prove we've forgiven each other, come out with me to-night."

"I'd love to, Gregg, but honestly I must go home. As I told you we've had a slight problem on our hands. I think we're on our way to solving it, but I must just go home and see how things are going." She had a sudden idea. "I'll tell you what. Why don't you come home with me?"

"Shouldn't I be in the way if you've got things to talk over?"

"Not a bit. A private word or two with Dad will let me know what I want to know. Do come, Gregg. You take Yvonne out a great deal but she hardly ever brings you home—and I'm sure Mother and Dad would love to see you."

He arranged to pick her up and drive her to Crownham Square when they both came off duty. It really didn't occur to her that she had done a thoughtless thing until she saw the sudden flash of blank surprise on Yvonne's face as Gregg was ushered in. Sylvia said doubtfully, "We shall be quite

a party, shan't we! Yvonne has already invited Tyler to dinner."

Still, what was done was done. And after her moment of surprise Yvonne came to Gregg's side and engaged him in friendly chatter about a recent theatre visit. Alison took an opportunity of a word with her father.

"Did you speak to Yvonne about taking a job?"

"Well, yes, I did, but she has no idea what she could do. It's all so strange to her, you see. She was brought up among girls who never would have to earn their living. And she shrinks from doing anything that might—well, might lower her in the eyes of her friends."

Alison resisted the temptation to protest that there was nothing "lowering" about an honest job of work, but she could see difficulties ahead. The job that Yvonne would eventually deign to accept might be hard to find.

Tyler arrived rather late, and they went into dinner at once. During the meal Gregg began to talk of the emergency with which he and Alison had had to deal during the day; he was still full of warm admiration for her, and to her surprise Alison felt Yvonne's eyes dwell on her with something almost of envy.

"On the few occasions when I've visited friends in hospital," Tyler put in, "I've always had the greatest admiration for the nurses. There's something so fine about the nursing profession."

"I've never regretted letting Alison train," said Eric. "I had hoped she'd come and help me in the business—on the managerial side, you know. But her heart was set on nursing, and I must say I think it's the finest career a woman can take up."

Yvonne rubbed a finger to and fro on the tablecloth. She appeared deeply impressed. "Women of good family take up nursing, don't they?" she queried.

—"My word yes," Gregg said, "at the hospital where I trained we had so many ladies and countesses and what not, we were always tripping over their coronets."

"I thought so." She said no more for the present, but when

the meal was over and they were settled in the sitting-room, returned to the topic. Her words were spoken in a low voice, meant for Tyler's ears alone, but Alison was approaching with their coffee and couldn't help overhearing.

"I've been thinking I ought to do something useful with my life," she was saying softly to Tyler. "Staying at home enjoying oneself is all right up to a point, but I ought to have a job. Don't you agree?"

Tyler looked rather unconvinced. "I suppose so. A lot of girls take up something these days." He accepted his coffee cup and appealed to Alison. "Do you think Yvonne ought to find something to occupy her time, Alison?"

"It has been suggested," she said drily.

"Well," said Yvonne in a louder tone so that all could hear, "I've decided to be a nurse."

No one was more astounded than Alison. She stared at her cousin, half-wondering if it were a joke. But Yvonne seemed perfectly in earnest. She sat with her hands clasped and half-raised, almost as if in prayer; she looked the perfect picture of the angelic, dedicated nurse.

But no one was going to allow this self-sacrifice.

"Darling, you wouldn't be able to stand the life!" cried Sylvia, utterly taken aback. "You're just not the type!"

"Why aren't I?" Yvonne demanded, rather piqued. "If Alison can do it, why can't I?"

"My dear child, it's not a thing you want to rush into just because someone you know is doing it," warned her uncle.

"But I'm not rushing into it, Uncle Eric. I've been thinking about it for—oh, ever so long. You must have seen how much I admire Alison and the work she does. I've just been waiting till I found my feet in England before I took the plunge."

"There you are, Yvonne," Tyler interjected. "You speak of 'taking the plunge', which means you understand that it's a big thing to undertake. Don't you think it's not quite the career for anyone as sensitive as you?"

"But I want to do some good in the world, Tyler. You didn't imagine I could find real fulfilment in the social round, did you?"

"No, perhaps not, perhaps not. A nature as generous as yours needs to extend help to others, I quite see that. But hospital life is rather grim in some of its aspects. Ask Gregg. I'm sure he'll agree with me."

"I think you'd find the rough and tumble of life in the wards a bit more than you bargained for," Gregg agreed.

"But others have trained and survived," Yvonne argued. "You said yourself—girls of good family."

"But only those with a core of— of— what shall I call it?"

"Toughness?" suggested Sylvia.

"That's not very complimentary to Alison—"

"Don't mind me," laughed Alison. "And as a matter of fact, that word will do. You need a particular kind of determination and perseverance."

"And are you saying I'm weak and indecisive?" Yvonne challenged.

Alison met her glance and, smiling, shook her head. "By no means. I have a deep regard for your strength of character."

"But you're not saying Yvonne should take up nursing?" begged Tyler.

"No." That was the last career Alison would have recommended for Yvonne. "No, perhaps nursing is not the career that would best suit her talents."

"Just as you say," Yvonne said submissively.

The others went on declaring emphatically that Yvonne was an angel to have thought of it, but that the strain of nurse-training would have been too much for her. Alison was silent, her eyes on Yvonne. Thus she alone saw the momentary gleam of triumphant satisfaction in her cousin's face.

It puzzled Alison for a moment. Then she wondered if her cousin were congratulating herself on bringing about, almost unintentionally, a verdict that suited her very well. It was possible that, if pushed to it, Yvonne would have begun to train as a

nurse. But Alison had a shrewd suspicion that the embargo placed on that career was much more to Yvonne's liking.

She had the following week-end off duty and was spending it at home with her family. She hoped, among other things, to bring the conversation round once more to job prospects for Yvonne; she was wondering whether the fashion world might not be a suitable sphere for her cousin's talents and one which she need not shudder to name to her well-bred friends.

But when she reached home rather late on Saturday after some necessary shopping of her own, she found she'd been forestalled. Gregg was already there, and he too had a job in mind for Yvonne.

"It'll be much less of a grind than actual nursing, yet you'll be able to feel that you're doing hospital work. What's more, I'll be able to see you there every day and explain anything that puzzles you. I've had so many dealings with the X-ray department that I could take you through it blindfold."

"The X-ray department?" Alison put in questioningly, pausing as she set down her parcels. "You're not suggesting Yvonne should train as a radiographer?"

"Nothing so technical. But you know Jessica Truman, the receptionist in the X-ray Clinic? I just heard this morning—she's leaving at a moment's notice to fly to New Zealand to join her husband, and her job's going spare. It struck me as the ideal thing for Yvonne."

Alison hesitated. She didn't really think Yvonne would ever be any good at a job where she had to deal with people who were sick, weary, or in trouble. Yet on the other hand if she kept looking askance at every suggestion, she would create an atmosphere in which the chances of seeing Yvonne in any sort of employment were greatly diminished.

"Perhaps it wouldn't be a good idea for me to be in the same hospital as Alison?" Yvonne suggested. "Two Blakelocks—mightn't it create a muddle?"

"I don't see why it need," Alison said. "You could give it a try, at any rate, Yvonne."

Yvonne looked down at her hands. Her face was cold, her attitude reluctant. Then suddenly she raised her head and gave Gregg a radiant smile. "But it will be wonderful!" she cried. "I'll be able to see you every day, Gregg!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

YVONNE went for an interview and, as might have been expected, was immediately accepted for the post of receptionist in the X-ray Clinic.

The Clinic was a little room next door to the main Department of Radiology. The idea was that people from Out-patients, on whom the examining doctor needed an urgent X-ray, should be "fed-in" to the main room as and when time was available for such work. The radiographer was a busy, irascible man, always snowed under with cases from the hospital wards, and it was the receptionist's task to fit in as many extra patients as she could.

In Alison's opinion, the job was an exacting one. Patients sitting in the Clinic grew tired, bored and restless as they waited to be summoned. Those who were ill—and these were the majority, for doctors seldom ask for an X-ray unless they suspect real trouble—needed special kindness and attention. Small children were a particular problem; they grew noisy and restless.

If it had been possible to give any of these people a definite appointment, the work would have been easier. But the main work of the radiotherapy room had to come first—the preparation of X-ray plates on patients who were brought down from the wards, the investigation of bronchial and digestive complaints, the demonstration of lesions, the tracking of dye-drinks, the siting of fractures prior to operation. These didn't come under the jurisdiction of the Clinic receptionist, although she was expected to help keep the department's records. But her main work was the regulation of the flow of out-patients. No nursing skill was called for, but tact, patience and unselfishness in vast amounts were essential.

Rather to Alison's surprise, Yvonne was a great success.

The first enthusiasm of her new role carried her along on a happy tide; moreover her appearance was a great asset. Women patients admired her, men patients adored her, and even fractious children were heard to ask if she had been sent from fairyland to look after them.

Alison's relief was heartfelt. But as time went by she noticed that Yvonne's enthusiasm waned. The clerical work, in particular, bored her to tears. The business of having to sit down to a mass of papers at nine o'clock and reduce them to order before the out-patients began to come in around ten grew tiresome. Getting up to consult files, getting up to put away unwanted notes in the cabinets—what a waste of time.

"It's so pointless!" she said irritably to Alison. "They ought to have an office boy to do it."

"It's too responsible a job for an office boy," Alison replied, hoping by a little judicious flattery to re-inflame her first enthusiasm. "A patient's notes are awfully important. The files kept in the radiography department could be vital."

"Oh, nonsense, ninety per cent of them are pure routine. I think a lot of it could be done away with. I can tell you this much—I'm not going to wear myself out putting papers away and getting them out again. It's futile."

Alison had known this feeling herself, many times. Some ward procedures, for instance, had always struck her as time-wasting. Yet she went on with them because continuity was so important; if someone had to take her place at a moment's notice there would be no muddle, no hiatus. She tried to explain this to Yvonne. "The one thing you musn't do in a hospital is get in a muddle. Vital time could be lost looking for things that ought to be under your hand. Don't let papers pile up, Yvonne."

Yvonne shrugged. Alison would have persevered with her argument but she could see she was getting nowhere.

In Huntford Ward at that time they had a surgical case that was exciting a great deal of interest. He was a middle-aged man in the throes of a dangerous kidney disease, and it had been

decided to carry out a new operational procedure—transplantation of a kidney from his younger brother.

Although a nurse will tell you that all her patients are equally important to her, there isn't any doubt that an unusual case calls out some special concern. Ill though he was, Donald Mahoney knew he was the darling of Huntford Ward, and enjoyed the benefits. He could always find a nurse willing to stay by his bed and talk. When he was taken down to the X-ray room there was always some devoted, white-aproned figure to walk by his trolley, although in Crownham District Hospital the accepted rule was for porters only to go down with ex-ward cases.

His brother Robert had meanwhile been a frequent visitor to the Out-patients Department, because it was important to know if he was healthy in every way and able to live a full life after he had sacrificed a kidney for his brother's recovery. As yet he was a shadowy figure to Huntford Ward, although they were prepared to make a fuss of him when he eventually came in for the operation.

To Yvonne, in fact, Robert Mahoney was nothing but a source of irritation. Papers, schedules and graphs about him were constantly being sent back and forth between the X-ray room and Huntford Ward. "Why don't they keep all the stuff together in one big folder until the operation is carried out?" she asked Alison crossly.

"They'll collate them in time for the operation," Alison explained soothingly. "After that it'll be quite a while before his name crops up again in your department. But in the meantime Mr. Groome and his 'firm' will be hopping about like cats on hot bricks, waiting to see how the graft takes."

"Don't tell me," groaned Yvonne. "Gregg never stops talking about it. Every day at lunch for a fortnight, we've had Donald Mahoney and Robert Mahoney and the plans for the operation. I'll be glad when the man's fit and well again."

Next day Donald Mahoney was due to go down to the X-ray room for a final radiograph. The porters arrived to carry him off.

Donald turned a faded yet lively grey eye on the group of nurses around his bed and winked mischievously.

"Now then, my dears, which of you shall have the honour of taking this little trip with me?"

"I'm free to go," began Cookie willingly.

"Indeed you are not, nurse," Sister Chalfont corrected her. "Have you forgotten the admission-and-discharge sheet? It hasn't been done yet."

Cookie turned away so that she could stick out the tip of a pink tongue at sister, who didn't really deserve such treatment. Donald smiled at Alison.

"Now how about you, staff-nurse? You've never been down with me. Now's your chance—now or never, maybe."

"Don't talk such nonsense. I promise to take you down the day you have the successful transplantation X-rayed. But today I haven't time" Alison said regretfully. "The physiotherapist is due in the ward in a minute, and I'm supposed to lend her a hand."

"Ah, come on," coaxed Donald, disappointed.

Alison glanced at sister. Sister nodded. They were at the stage when they would do anything for this quiet, undemanding man.

"Be as quick as you can," sister said. "I'll tell Miss Gilbert you won't be long. While you're down there, staff-nurse, ask in the X-ray Clinic for the brother's papers and have them collated, will you?"

Down they went in the lift. Watercole, the radiographer, was quick and efficient as usual; he handed the patient's file back to Alison and dismissed her brusquely. Alison sent the porters up in the lift with her patient and went next door to the Clinic.

"Would you look out Robert Mahoney's papers, please, Yvonne, and—"

"Not again?" cried Yvonne.

"Yes, please, and quick as you can if you don't mind. I'm needed upstairs."

"Look here, you can see I'm snowed under with work. I can't just drop everything to fish out Robert Mahoney's file."

"I'm afraid you'll have to, duckie. They're wanted upstairs—"

"But what for? They only came down from Huntford yesterday."

"The op's tomorrow. Mr. Groome wants the papers put in together now, so he can study them overnight."

"Oh, well, leave that lot here. I'll find the brother's papers in a minute and put them in."

"Oh, I don't know if I can do that, Sister told me to bring them with me—"

"I'll send them up in ten minutes. I simply can't stop now to do it, or I shall lose track of this idiotic series of appointments."

Rather doubtfully, Alison relinquished the thick file on Donald Mahoney. "Do it right after whatever you're doing now," she urged.

"Yes—certainly—I've told you, I'll send it up in ten minutes."

Alison hurried off to Huntford and was immediately claimed by the physio. Later that afternoon Mr. Groome and his colleagues arrived to take a last look at their patient of next day. Sister Chalfont having gone off duty, Alison went to get the patient's notes and be "in attendance" for any nursing instructions.

That was when alarm descended on her like a falling tree. The file on Donald Mahoney was nowhere to be found.

Mr. Groome was standing at the end of Donald's bed, his head slightly turned away from the houseman who was speaking to him. His eyes were on Alison, and he was obviously waiting, rather impatiently, for her to spring to attention. Consultants must never be kept waiting.

But the notes? Where were the notes?

Mr. Groome said something to Gregg. Gregg left the group and came to the staff desk. "The boss wants to know what's keeping you."

"I can't find the X-ray examination file on Donald Mahoney, Gregg!"

"Can't find it? Don't be silly. Snap into it—Groome's all on edge over this op."

"Gregg, I *can't* find them."

Down the aisle of the ward came Mr. Groome himself, with two young R.S.O.s and a physician in tow. "Staff nurse!" he said sharply. "I'm waiting."

"Yes, sir, I'm sorry." She came out from behind the desk.

"Well, then, come along. If you have time to waste, I have not." He led the way back towards the patient's bed, saying over his shoulder as he did so, "The wet-plates have come up from the X-ray department. Bring me the X-ray notes, staff nurse."

She had to hurry to catch him up. "I'm—I'm afraid the notes aren't to hand, sir."

He stopped dead. "What do you mean, aren't to hand? Don't be such a fool, girl. Fetch them, wherever they are!"

"Yes, Mr. Groome." She went back to the desk for another despairing look. She already knew they weren't there.

Cookie hurried up. "You had them last, Alison. What did you do with them?"

"I left them in the X-Ray Clinic with Yvonne."

"Oh, heavens! She should have sent them up ages ago! Shall I slip down and get them?"

"Yes, be quick, Cookie."

But that was much too easy a way out. Mr. Groome wheeled. "Where are you going, nurse?" he thundered.

"To—to the X-ray Clinic, Mr. Groome," faltered Cookie, her periwinkle blue eyes wide with alarm.

"To fetch the missing notes?"

"Er—yes, sir."

"You'll be back in two minutes, or I'll know the reason."

Cookie almost ran from the ward. The surgeon turned an angry face on Alison. "Sheer bad organization," he stormed.

"Yes, sir," she replied.

Time passed. Cookie didn't appear. Mr. Groome seized the ward telephone and was put through to the X-ray Clinic.

"Found those notes yet?" he roared. "No? Who's that? Who? The receptionist? Come up here this instant!"

He slammed the receiver back and glared at Alison. "What a way to run a hospital!" he exclaimed disgustedly.

Within minutes the ward doors swung open to reveal Cookie with Yvonne at her heels, both of them looking scared.

Groome crooked a finger at Yvonne. "Where are those papers?" he demanded.

"I—I—I'm afraid I don't know, sir." Her lovely mouth trembled, her eyes filled with tears.

Mr. Groome hesitated. "There, there, child," he said more gently. "Don't look so frightened, I shan't eat you. I only want the notes on Donald Mahoney, that's all. They appear to be in your clinic, though why, I can't imagine."

"Well, sir—that's what I think too. Why am I supposed to have them?"

"Hanged if I know." He turned to Alison. "Why is the receptionist in the X-ray Clinic supposed to have the file?"

"Sister Chalfont told me to fetch Robert Mahoney's notes when I went down to the X-ray room this morning with Donald. I left them with the receptionist—"

"Left them? Why should you?"

"Well, sir, she was too busy just then to get out Robert's papers, so I left the whole thing to be collated and sent up later."

"When was this? What time?"

"About an hour and half ago, sir."

"Well, young lady? What do you say to that?"

Yvonne nodded. "Staff nurse did come to me for the brother's notes, sir. But I gave them to her and she took them with her."

Groome swung round again to Alison. "Well?" he demanded. And at that moment, Alison was going scarlet with shame.

CHAPTER NINE

NOT shame for herself, but for Yvonne—shame at hearing her own cousin utter a downright lie. Her own cousin, accepted into the family by her parents with the deepest love and trust. She knew and Yvonne knew that what Yvonne had just said was entirely untrue: yet Yvonne could stand there with eyes full of blue innocence, aware what Alison thought of her and quite untouched by shame.

Perhaps she was doing it out of sheer fright. Mr. Groome's roar of anger on the telephone was enough to frighten anyone. Yvonne would know she was in for trouble unless she had a good defence. And the best defence was "deny everything and throw the blame on someone else". So long as your conscience will allow you to do it, that is . . .

Alison could easily guess what had happened. Yvonne had laid the Mahoney file aside to be dealt with later, forgotten it, and probably allowed it to be mixed up with other less important matters on her desk.

"I'm waiting," the consultant said ominously to Alison.

"I never had the collated notes, sir."

"But this girl has just said she gave them to you."

"She's mistaken."

She heard Gregg draw a quick breath, and shot a glance at him. He was watching her in puzzled alarm. His eyes said, "Surely you're not going to drag Yvonne into this mess?"

"One of you must have them," resumed Mr. Groome. "You took Mahoney's notes down with him. Did you bring them back?"

"No, sir."

"Then what did you do with them?"

"I left them in the Clinic for the notes on Robert Mahoney to be put in."

"Oh, Alison!" Yvonne said, in the tone that implies, "How can you say such a thing?"

"What a crew of scatterbrains," Groome growled. "Listen to me—that file hasn't evaporated. It's got to be found, and I want it found *fast*. If not, the person responsible will be on the carpet before me, and I needn't tell you what the result will be. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Alison replied.

When the others had trooped out behind the consultant, Gregg remained. He looked from one to the other. "Hadn't you better start looking?" he suggested.

"Gregg, you don't think *I've* got that file?" cried Yvonne.

"I didn't say anything about who had it—"

"I do think it's hard that Alison should throw the blame on me. She knows people are more likely to believe I'm to blame because I'm inexperienced."

"Listen," Gregg said rather sternly, "there's a man's life at stake. I don't give a hang who's at fault. I want those papers found."

"Go down and have a look through the stuff on your desk, Yvonne," Alison said briefly, turning away.

"There you are!" Yvonne objected, her hurt blue eyes on Gregg as she moved to obey. "You see?"

Gregg refused to make any comment. "Come on," he said, taking her by the arm. "Hurry downstairs and have a look around. I'll keep Groome busy for ten minutes or a quarter of an hour." He hurried out ahead of her.

Alison called Yvonne back. "That file is somewhere in that waste-paper-basket of an office of yours," she said.

"I say it is not."

"Don't let's pretend, Yvonne. You know I left Donald Mahoney's papers in your office. Now I'll strike a bargain with you. Find them and bring them up here, and I'll see you get into as little trouble as possible. But if you don't find them, I'll see you're thrown out of Crownham District lock, stock and barrel."

"You're very sure of yourself," said Yvonne evenly. "We'll see who comes off best, shall we?"

She walked quickly out of the ward. For appearances' sake, Alison carried out a search in the ward, but she knew the Mahoney notes weren't there. About fifteen minutes later, going out to complete the rounds by looking in Sister's office, her eye was caught by something on the sill of a window at the far end of the corridor, near the lift. She walked to the window and picked up the missing folder of notes on the Mahoney case.

Within minutes Mr. Groome came back with his retinue. He said nothing when Alison handed him the notes, but went to his patient. It wasn't until the examination was completed that he touched on the earlier matter.

"Where were the notes?"

"On the window-sill by the lift."

"So they had been brought upstairs after all. Did you ring that little receptionist to let her know you'd found them?"

"I think she knew, sir."

Mr. Groome frowned at her. "What the devil do you mean by that? Did you ring and let her know, or didn't you?"

"No, sir."

"Then do it now. She may still be searching."

Alison was about to say she was sure Yvonne was doing nothing of the sort. Then she realised that her attitude must seem spiteful and unco-operative to the others. Gregg said quietly, "The least you can do is to let her know, Alison."

Going pink, she picked up the phone and was put through to the X-ray Clinic. "Mr. Groome wants you to know that the missing file has turned up," she said woodenly.

"How nice of him to think of me," came Yvonne's voice, small and clear on the telephone but audible to those standing near.

Mr. Groome smiled. "Tell her you're sorry for making her anxious."

Alison raised her eyes to his. "I'm to tell her I'm sorry?"

"Of course. You are, aren't you? It was your fault she got involved in this fracas."

Alison drew a deep breath. "I'm sorry you were made anxious," she added into the telephone.

"That's all right," Yvonne said sweetly. "So long as the file has turned up and Mr. Groome hasn't been inconvenienced too much."

With a satisfied nod the consultant turned away. "I feel in need of my tea," he announced. "You lads coming?"

Most of the others went with him. Gregg excused himself on the grounds of patients still to be seen in the ward. Alison busied herself with preparing the report for the night staff.

All at once a broad hand came between her eyes and the paper. "Do you remember putting the file on the window-sill?" he asked when she looked up.

"No, I certainly don't remember any such thing."

"You might have put it there while you shut the lift doors."

"If I had come up in the lift, and was carrying the file, I might have."

"Didn't you come up in the lift?"

"Oh, what does it matter?" she said wearily. "The incident's closed."

"Not by a long chalk. I simply can't understand how you could be careless with something so vital as the Mahoney notes. I want to know what happened. Did you come up in the lift?"

"I can't prove that I didn't."

"I'm not asking you to prove it. I just want to know. Did you take the lift or did you walk up?"

"I walked up. The lift was in use. I waved to the porters inside it—they were going down with a patient for occupational therapy, that old lady who's crippled with arthritis. As the lift sank past me they looked up and I waved. But I don't suppose they'd remember."

"Then why should you have put the file down on the window-sill?"

"It's really rather difficult to imagine a reason."

"But that's where it was found, all the same."

"Nobody denies that."

"Yet you must have had the papers to bring upstairs, otherwise how did they get on the window-sill?"

"It's a problem, isn't it? And to think they were there for nearly two hours, with people walking back and forth in the corridor, and nobody noticed them."

He frowned. "That really is peculiar. It almost makes one think—"

"What?"

"That they'd only just been put there. But that's ridiculous. Why should anybody—?"

Alison gathered up the report and rose from the desk. She was too exhausted to go on with this conversation. "If you think about it," she said wearily, "you ought to be able to work out how the papers got there, and why. And now here comes Night Sister. You must excuse me, Gregg."

He let her walk by him without protest. She went off duty, more depressed and upset than she would have believed possible by the events of the last few hours.

What shocked her utterly was the discovery that Yvonne was a ruthless, heartless liar. There was no other way to describe the manner in which she had saved herself from Mr. Groome's wrath.

And this was the girl her parents idolized, the girl whom everyone admired and whom Gregg and Tyler adored. Alison turned the facts over in her mind again and again; so far as she could see there was nothing to be done about it. No one would believe her if she tried to show Yvonne up in her true light. She almost wished she hadn't been vouchsafed this knowledge; it would have been better not to know, to go on doubting herself and wondering if she was envious and unjust, rather than to be sure Yvonne was a double-dealer and still be unable to protect those she loved from her wiles.

Restless and uneasy, she couldn't settle to any of the odd jobs that awaited her in her room. About nine o'clock she went out to a café in the High Street, more for somewhere to go than from

any desire for a cup of coffee. She hadn't been in the café long when the door opened and Yvonne came in. She studied the occupants and was about to go out again but on second thoughts came over to Alison.

"Has Gregg been in here?" she demanded.

"Not since I've been here."

Yvonne looked disgruntled, ordered coffee, and sat down beside Alison without any appearance of embarrassment.

"We were supposed to have a date," she announced. "But he rang to say he couldn't leave his precious Mr. Mahoney until a bit later and he'd meet me here. I've been to the news theatre filling in time."

Alison had nothing to say to this. She felt absolutely disinclined for conversation with Yvonne. They sat in silence until the door opened once more and Gregg appeared.

"Well," said Yvonne in laughing reproof, "about time."

"Sorry, sorry. But you know how it is—we're like cats on hot bricks about Donald Mahoney and his brother." He bought a cup of coffee and suggested they should all go to a booth where they could have, as he put it, "a comfortable chat". Alison tried to excuse herself, but found she was being shepherded towards the booth.

"Mr. Groome's in a state of nerves about this operation," he began. "It was lucky for both of you that those notes turned up again so quickly."

"Darling," coaxed Yvonne, "don't let's start all over again about those notes. We heard enough from Mr. Groome."

"He let you off pretty lightly. Alison wasn't so lucky."

"Well, Alison's tougher than me."

"I wonder if that's true? She'd be just as hurt if she were unjustly accused, I imagine."

"Gregg, sweetie, reserve all your concern for me, now won't you? Alison can look after herself. Can't you Alison?"

"But it's still a mystery how that file got onto that window-sill, Yvonne."

She leaned forward and set a slender finger against his lips.

"S-sh," she murmured. "If you won't be a good boy, I shall get up and go straight home."

He shook his head so as to get free from her embargo. "But I was wondering if someone could have brought up that file and left it there for Alison—"

"You're a bore," she said, pouting. "Now I really am going home." She pushed her coffee cup away and got up.

"No, wait a minute, Yvonne—For Alison's sake it ought to be cleared up."

"And for our own sakes it ought to be forgotten for the present. Didn't you say you would have to be back in the hospital by ten-thirty? We only have about an hour left. If you're going to waste it on this kind of talk, I may as well say goodnight now."

She had edged out of the booth and was moving away. Gregg got up and went after her. They had an argument in low tones, and then Yvonne raised herself on tiptoe and kissed him lightly, almost teasingly, in farewell. She went out. After a moment's hesitation Gregg hurried after her.

Alison thought that if she were in love, she couldn't have been happy about being treated like that—as if she were a troublesome child. Yet she had to admit there was genuine affection in Yvonne's voice when she called Gregg darling, and the fact that she had come across the busy borough of Crownham on her own merely to spend an hour with him argued something deep and sincere. It was a puzzling situation. And one on which there was a great deal still to be learned, as Alison discovered on her next visit home.

She and her mother were discussing money problems once more.

"It's got to be a long-term project," she said to Sylvia, pushing her thick hair off her hot forehead. "You will be careful from now on, won't you Mother?"

"Well, I will, I suppose . . . But really there's no need to worry so much about it, you know, because Yvonne's promised to pay off all the bills."

"Yvonne? Using what for money?" Alison asked in ironic amusement.

"She'll have plenty of money when she marries Tyler."

"When she—? Who says she's going to marry Tyler?" asked Alison, startled.

"Why, *she* does, of course."

"But—but—" Then she got control of her thoughts. "Has Tyler said anything?"

"Not yet, but he will. He'd propose like a shot, only he's afraid he's a bit too old for her. He as good as told me so himself."

"And what did you reply?"

"I told him not to be so silly. Thirty-seven or so, I suppose he is. That's not old."

"It's about twice Yvonne's age, all the same."

"But since Yvonne doesn't mind, what difference does it make?"

"She's talked to you about it?"

"Naturally. As a matter of fact, and strictly between us two, Alison, she expected him to pop the question before now."

"And if he did, she'd accept?"

"To be sure she would. It would be a fine thing for her. As she says herself, she'll be able to clear off all her debts out of the allowance he makes her and never worry about money again as long as she lives. And she'll be Lady Ames."

At that very moment Yvonne was out for the evening—and with whom? With Gregg! Alison felt a bewildered indignation as she thought of it. Poor Gregg. He could have no idea how short-lived his happiness was likely to be.

Gregg brought Yvonne home rather early. A barbecue party to which they were going had been cancelled due to a sudden summer storm. He came in for a chat, but excused himself fairly soon on the grounds of a hard day ahead.

"It's always the same," Yvonne said pettishly, throwing herself back in her chair. "It's always either 'I've a hard day ahead' or 'I've had a hard day today'."

"I expect it's true, dear," Sylvia said pacifically as she put away her knitting and prepared to go up to bed. "He has to work hard and I suppose he always will. Coming Eric?"

Her husband woke from an armchair nap and heaved himself to his feet to follow her. The two girls were left alone.

Yvonne drummed with her fingers on the arm of her chair. "I suppose Gregg really *must* be a surgeon?" she asked suddenly. "Isn't there anything else he could do?"

"You mean something that would bring in more money?" Alison countered drily.

Her cousin looked up. "It would be an advantage," she replied.

"Not to Gregg. He wouldn't be happy in any other job."

"So he tells me. It's the one thing we argue about." She shrugged. "Men are such romantics in some things, aren't they? Unrealistic dreamers . . . My father was like that."

"But you are a realist, Yvonne."

"I learned to be, very early in life."

"Is that why you intend to marry Tyler?"

Yvonne's eyes narrowed. "He hasn't asked me yet," she said carefully.

"But Mother says you intend to say yes when he does."

"Your mother—!" She snapped off the word. Then she smiled. "She can keep nothing to herself, can she?"

"Is there any reason why this should be a secret? There's nothing wrong with intending to marry Tyler. Unless of course—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you're in love with someone else."

"I told you I was a realist. You can't live on love."

"But Yvonne!" Alison cried in sudden passion. "You can't do a thing like this to Gregg!"

There was a momentary pause. Then Yvonne said calmly, "Why should you care what I do to Gregg?"

"You wouldn't hurt him, Yvonne! You have some feelings for him, I'm sure you have!"

"And so have you, it appears. Well, well, who would have believed it! The quiet, self-controlled Alison is secretly consumed with love for a man who doesn't even think of her except as a fellow-worker."

"What I feel doesn't come into it. It's Gregg I'm thinking of—"

"I suppose you'll feel bound to rush to him now and tell him your news?"

"Don't you think he ought to know?"

"I would advise you not to interfere, Alison. You'll be sorry if you do."

"I'm not worried about what he'll say to me when he hears. He'll be hurt, I realize that—but he ought to be warned how soon he'll have to give you up."

Yvonne raised her eyebrows. "Who says he has to give me up?"

"Who says—? But if you marry Tyler, of course Gregg would have to give you up."

"I said you were aware of my feelings for Gregg. Do you really think I'd let marriage part us?"

Alison was utterly perplexed. She stood staring down at Yvonne, wondering if she had heard aright, and what it could mean.

Yvonne rose, stretching a little. "Don't upset yourself about it, Alison. These things can be arranged in a civilized fashion."

Alison seized her cousin by the arm. "You don't mean that after you're married to Tyler—?"

"But of course," Yvonne said softly, shaking herself free. "So long as Tyler doesn't know, where's the harm?"

CHAPTER TEN

YVONNE walked towards the sitting-room door. Alison got there first, closed it with a quick movement, and leaned against it. "Just a moment," she said, her voice trembling. "Do you realize what you've just said?"

Yvonne eyed her as if she had gone mad. "What's all the excitement about?" she asked.

"You said that you could marry Tyler yet still go on the same with Gregg."

"It should be possible, with a little finesse."

"But people don't do things like that!"

"Dear me, what an odd view of life you must have. I assure you they do. I've learnt a great deal from watching how other people manage their problems."

"You couldn't do a thing like that to Tyler!" Alison cried vehemently.

"You ought to make up your mind who you feel concerned about," her cousin advised. "First it's Gregg, then it's Tyler."

"But Tyler's so honest and open—you couldn't treat him like that! It would break his heart!"

"My dear cousin, since Tyler need never know a thing, his heart would remain quite intact."

"And Gregg?" Alison asked, her anger rising even further. "What will Gregg say when he hears?"

"Why don't you ask him?" Yvonne returned, watching her closely as she spoke.

"Ask him?"

"Why not? I suppose he'll find it embarrassing to discuss the subject with you, because after all he believes it to be our business only—his and mine. But if you insist on interfering—"

"You mean Gregg—Gregg knows what you intend?" And as

she read the answer in Yvonne's triumphant smile, Alison covered her eyes with her hands.

When she looked up her cousin was still watching her carefully. She gave a small nod. "I thought that would take care of you and all your objections," she said contemptuously. "What happens to all your indignation now? You can't go to Gregg and ask him about it—the idea sickens you. You're a fool, Alison. You always struck me as a blundering, interfering busybody, yet I always knew I could deal with you if I had to. Your trouble is, you don't know how to be ruthless. You don't want your own way enough. The moment you meet a real obstacle you lose your courage."

"Is that your philosophy of life, then? You want your own way so much that you don't care who you hurt to get it?"

"No one will get hurt so long as no one interferes. Just remember that, Alison, and we'll have no trouble."

"I won't let you do this to Tyler," Alison replied.

"How can you prevent it? What can you do? You can go to Tyler with your story. Will he believe you? Ask yourself—will he believe what you say if I deny it? All you'll do is set up yet another barrier between yourself and your friends."

"You can't win all the time, Yvonne—"

"I think I can. I only play to win, you see. I don't have this foolish English notion about being a good loser. You were the only unknown quantity, and now, as luck would have it, I've found out how to handle you. You might have interfered—but I don't think you will now. You couldn't bear the look of embarrassment and unhappiness on Gregg's face if you had to talk to him about our future, so you won't go to Gregg. Neither will you go to Tyler, because he simply wouldn't hear a word against me."

"But can't you see how wrong it is? Can't you see that you're warping your life?"

"On the contrary, I'm setting myself free from the one thing that could send my life awry—a lack of money."

"But money isn't everything, Yvonne—"

"There speaks the stupid, high-minded altruist! Where has that attitude ever got you and your family? I tell you, that morning

in spring when I discovered what I'd let myself in for by coming here, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry! Not sixpence to bless yourselves with, yet you take in an extra member of your family and set about struggling to feed her and clothe her—Oh, it was absurd! I knew I had to find my own salvation, and do it quickly before you dragged me down to your own petty way of living. Luckily I knew of a way of escape. I could get in touch with Tyler. And no amount of sermonizing from you is going to prevent me from marrying him and getting clear of life on ten pounds a week for ever!"

"You're making a terrible mistake, Yvonne! I beg you to think what you're doing," Alison pleaded. "If not for your own sake, for Gregg's! You may be able to bewitch him for a time but eventually he'll come to his senses and realize what you've made him do. It will be a tragedy—Yvonne, don't do it!"

Yvonne took her by the shoulders and quite gently pushed her out of the way. She opened the door and stepped through into the hall. "Pleasant dreams," she said negligently over her shoulder, and went up to bed.

Alison didn't even attempt to go to bed for many hours to come. She sat in the armchair by the window, staring out at the summer night but seeing nothing, her mind in a turmoil. Time and again she found herself crying inwardly, "It can't be true! Gregg would never agree to such a thing!" Yet she knew that Yvonne had meant what she said—that though she intended to marry Tyler she didn't intend to relinquish her hold on Gregg.

Before her memory rose the many occasions on which Yvonne had been able to twist other people round her little finger. That time when Gregg had tried to question her about the missing file—how easily she had dealt with that! Who was a match for her? Even Alison herself, who knew her for what she was, was powerless to act against her.

Yet she ought to do something. She ought to speak out, to protest, even if it was useless. She vowed that she would speak—that she would challenge Gregg, make him see how wrong it would be to deceive Tyler . . .

It was possible to make such a vow in the early hours of the morning, alone in her room. To keep it when she was face to face with Gregg was quite impossible. She took refuge in being silent in his presence, and when he frowned and tried to make her talk to him, she took to avoiding him as much as possible.

The Mahoney operation had gone well. "We'll allow him up next week, I think," Groome said to sister as they finished the rounds one morning. "It's simply a case of rest and attention until he's fully recovered. Luckily I know I can count on good nursing."

The group had paused by sister's table, where Alison was at work. When the consultant had gone on his way with Sister Chalfont still at his elbow, Alison found that Gregg was standing staring down at her, arms folded and feet planted apart as if he meant to be there a long while.

"You!" he accused. "What did I ever do to you to deserve this treatment from you?"

She looked away. "Nothing," she said awkwardly. "At least, I don't know what you mean."

"This is the showdown, Alison. I shan't move from this spot until you tell me what I've done."

"You haven't done anything. Don't be silly, Gregg. Go away, I'm busy."

"You're always busy these days. And unsmiling. What's wrong with you? Have I offended you?" His alert brown eyes roved over her quiet face, missing little. "No, you're not offended. You're—embarrassed, in fact you're ashamed. But what of? What's wrong?"

"Gregg, will you please let me go on with my work?"

"Not until you tell me what's wrong. Are you still upset over that missing Mahoney file. Because of course I realize that—"

"No, it's not that."

"What, then? Is it—is it because I had so little success when I tried to investigate the matter? I know I didn't acquit myself awfully well, but you know, Alison—well, let's put it this way. I think I know what happened the day the file went missing, and

though I can't approve of how the matter was put right, at least no one actually suffered. I console myself by thinking that if you had got into real trouble with Groome the true culprit would have spoken up."

Involuntarily Alison shook her head.

"You don't think so?" he said immediately, pouncing on this clue. "Alison, that's not very pretty. You're saying you suspect Yvonne of deliberately putting the blame on you."

She met his eyes and took a deep breath. "What I think about Yvonne is less important than your view of her. How do you think of Yvonne, Gregg?"

"How do I think of her? That's easy to answer. With all her faults—and she has one or two—I couldn't imagine my life without her."

"Rather than part with her, you'd do anything?"

He smiled unexpectedly. "I believe I know what's wrong," he suggested. "Yvonne's been giving you her view of life."

"She has." She studied him intently. "Do you approve of it?"

"Oh—well—you must realize that being brought up with the daughters of wealthy men has given her an over-emphasized view of the importance of money. She'll get over it, given time."

"You really think so?" she faltered, a ray of hope beginning to light up the desperate gloom in which she had lived the last few days.

"Of course I do. It's the same with this stubborn idea she's got about my leaving the medical profession. So far I haven't been able to convince her it's impossible, but by and by I feel sure things will come right."

"For you, how can they, if she marries Tyler?"

He drew back in amazement. "Marry Tyler?" he echoed. "What are you talking about? She's going to marry *me*."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

FOR a moment or two it did just seem possible to Alison that Yvonne had been playing a cruel practical joke on her. Gregg sounded so confident that he and Yvonne were to marry.

"Have you asked her?" she queried.

"Well—no—not in so many words. But it's understood between us. The only thing that stands in the way is this feeling of Yvonne's that the medical profession is a bit of a drag. I hoped that working in the hospital would make her change her mind—I thought that actually training to be a nurse wouldn't be a good thing but I hoped that being in the community, helping people and finding satisfaction in the work, would convince her. But really I think it's been a mistake. Hospital routine irritates her, and the power of the big bosses frightens her—hence the panic she got into over that missing file."

"If she doesn't change her mind about the medical profession what could you do?"

"Sweep the poor girl off her feet and run away with her to Gretna. What else?" He grinned cheerfully, and then finding that Alison didn't respond, said more seriously, "She cares for me, Alison. I know she does. Despite all the difficulties, it'll work out all right. After all, she's only eighteen—there's plenty of time."

"Nineteen at the end of this week. Are you invited to the birthday party?"

"I hope to be back in time. You know Groome's taking me to this conference in Scarborough where he's going to read a paper on the kidney transplantation operation. I've got to be there to tell them what it felt like mopping his brow for him. But I should be back by Friday."

The birthday party had grown out of a suggestion by Mrs. Blakelock that they should have a few friends in—"after all, the poor child never *did* get to Ascot", she mourned.

Alison, thus consulted, had made no objection to an evening with a few friends. But the scheme had grown despite all her efforts to restrain her mother, and now they were committed to entertaining forty people on the evening of Yvonne's nineteenth birthday. Alison, feeling she could only enhance her reputation as a "killjoy", kept insisting that it must be nothing lavish, and had tried to keep down expenses by proposing a buffet supper; but she suspected that all sorts of extras were added to the programme as soon as her back was turned.

Gregg returned to Crownham Hospital on the Thursday evening, and rang Alison at the nurses' home. "Are you going out anywhere, Alison?"

"Nowhere special."

"Could you come out with me for a bite of supper and a chat?"

She frowned at the telephone stand. "Haven't you a date with Yvonne?"

"No, you see, I wasn't sure what time I'd be back, and when I rang your home they told me she'd gone out. With Tyler," he added rather uncertainly. "It's Tyler I want to talk to you about, Alison."

"Oh, Gregg . . . I'd rather not." She felt a vast unwillingness to meddle any further in his affairs. She was unsure of herself; uncertain whether Yvonne had really meant the things she'd told her, uncertain what she ought to say to Gregg about Tyler.

"Please, Alison," he begged. "I've had it on my mind ever since Monday."

She realized she couldn't avoid this encounter. Gregg would want to know her reasons for thinking Yvonne was taking Tyler seriously—that was only natural. So, though still reluctant, she agreed to meet him at the main gate in ten minutes' time.

When they were settled in a booth in the usual old café Gregg began at once on what he had in mind.

"What reason did you have for mentioning Tyler's name the other day, Alison?"

She hesitated. She didn't want to reply outright that Yvonne

herself had talked about the marriage. She couldn't bear to tell Gregg what Yvonne had planned. She was no longer certain whether Yvonne had really meant it. But she was fairly sure of one thing: whatever else was to go hand in hand with the marriage, Yvonne really did mean to marry Tyler.

"Well?" Gregg insisted. "I know she's fond of Tyler in a lukewarm sort of way—regards him as a sort of kind elder brother. But she doesn't take him any more seriously than that, I'm certain."

"But you will admit that Tyler takes Yvonne pretty seriously?"

"Oh, he worships the ground she treads on. Anyone can see that. But it's not the kind of love you base married life on. And Yvonne finds his devotion almost comic."

"Has she told you that? That she finds him funny?" Alison asked almost indignantly. "That doesn't strike me as a very nice attitude. If Tyler liked me as much as he likes Yvonne, I wouldn't laugh at him."

"Don't get cross with me. I know you think a lot of him. And I didn't actually mean that Yvonne had said anything. It's just—you know that teasing way she has . . ."

"Gregg, I'll tell you the way I see it. Tyler is a very fine man. I can imagine a woman being very happy for the rest of her life if she married him."

"You, perhaps. But not Yvonne," Gregg objected. "You don't realize how—how very strong her feelings can be, Alison. Don't let's pretend about this—for reasons that seem adequate to you, you tend not to like Yvonne. All right, I'm not blaming you although I can't accept your judgement. But at least you'll agree that I've had more chance of knowing the real Yvonne than you have. I'm not troubled by the faint tinge of snobbery that sometimes creeps into her conversation—I put that down to the absurd education she had. Nor am I worried by the way she reacted when Groome scared her. If she has faults, so have I. It just so happens that we belong together. It's not a thing of logic or reason—it's a matter of emotion. I know she loves me. I *know* it, Alison."

He fell silent, his thoughts wandering off down the happy paths of the paradise he shared with Yvonne. Alison didn't disturb him. She was struggling with her own feelings. To hear him talk of his love for someone else was inexpressible pain. Jealousy was a thing of the past. But pity for Gregg, a sense of desolation, a dread of unhappiness to come, filled her heart and silenced her tongue.

She moved in her chair, trying by trivial physical readjustment to find ease. The movement brought back Gregg's wandering attention. He fixed her with a steady cheerful gaze.

"So what's all this nonsense about her marrying poor old Tyler?"

"Gregg, he isn't so old. He's less than ten years your senior. And he has a title, and he's rich."

"If he had the moon to offer on a gold plate, what difference would it make since she doesn't love him?"

"I never said she did."

"Are you implying she'd marry him for the title and the money?" he demanded, bristling.

She took a deep breath. "All I can tell you is this, Gregg. My mother hears all Yvonne's hopes and plans, and my mother takes it absolutely for granted that Yvonne is going to marry Tyler."

Gregg began to laugh. "Oh, so that's it. Why didn't you say so in the first place? I like your mother very much, Alison, but you yourself would be the first to admit she gets a bit muddled from time to time."

"Gregg dear." She put out a hand, and with cool fingers covered his. "Please . . . Don't be over-confident . . . You can't be sure that Mother is so utterly wrong. Do at least take her opinion into account. It would be so awful—so tragic—if you were completely unprepared—and—and—"

But she couldn't go on. He covered her hand with his own and pressed it tight. "I can see you think it could happen, and that it would make you unhappy if it did. But I honestly don't think you need worry about Tyler marrying Yvonne. If it's any comfort

to you—which probably it isn't—I don't think Tyler is the marrying kind."

"But Yvonne herself said—" Alison broke out unguardedly.

That startled him. As she stopped dead, he leaned forward to study her misery-blurred features, her unhappy brown eyes.

"What did Yvonne say?" he demanded.

"We had a talk. She said—various things—oh, I don't want to go into it—I can't! Gregg, don't ask me. Please don't!"

He let go his hold on her hand and sat silent for a time. Clearly her emphasis had made him think again, had shaken his confidence a little. Then he shook his head. "It's a misunderstanding, that's all. You really believe you heard something that gave grounds for this mad idea. Well, there's only one thing for it. I'll have to talk it over with Yvonne."

She foresaw nothing but distress for him in that interview but she knew that he would never be easy until he had heard Yvonne's version. She nodded.

"I'll do it as soon as I can," he went on. "I know the whole thing is nonsense but somehow it bothers me."

"Don't try to have a serious discussion with her until after the party," she advised. "Her head is full of it for the present."

"Well, that's not so long to wait. One more day. Then comes the week-end, and we'd already arranged to go out for the day on Sunday. That'll give us ample time to thrash the whole thing out."

Alison hoped the matter might be dropped now, but found it was practically impossible to turn the conversation away from a discussion of Yvonne. As if to reassure himself Gregg began a catalogue of all her good points. Alison could do nothing except listen with sympathy. She was glad when at last he saw her home to the hospital.

The birthday party preparations were almost completed by the time Alison arrived home next day. It was high summer weather: all the windows in the house were thrown open to the mild air and the little paved yard at the back of the house, set out with tables and chairs, had something of the air of a Paris pavement café. Geraniums and hydrangeas in tubs lent gaiety and a

trellis threaded with coloured lights masked the wall of the old garage. Alison had to admit that the general effect was tasteful and charming, allowing the maximum number of guests with the minimum difficulty of accommodating them.

Yvonne was already clad in the dress of gold tissue which she had worn once before, the night of Tyler's first visit. If anything, the months that had intervened had only added to the beauty of its wearer. Although she had always looked a little older than her years, tonight there was an elegance and poise about her unusual in a girl of nineteen. Her face was less rounded and youthful, her eyes had the confident gleam of experience in life. She looked as much in control of her destiny as a woman of thirty.

Alison was still upstairs dressing as the first guests began to arrive. When she came down she found that, with her own particular brand of magic, Yvonne had succeeded in getting the party going. Couples were dancing in the hall, groups were laughing and talking at the garden tables.

Yvonne had had the usual medley of presents from her guests. Gregg, when he arrived, brought a length of Yorkshire tweed which he said had been chosen by the prettiest woman doctor at the Scarborough medical conference, one Dr. Phyllis Michael. Yvonne made a face and vowed never to use the tweed except as a doormat.

When Tyler arrived Alison was watching. She thought Yvonne opened the box he proffered with exceptional eagerness, and that her face fell when she found it contained only a single orchid, though it was a bloom of perfect beauty.

The party went with a swing. Alison had been tired after her day's work, but as dance succeeded dance and game succeeded game she found new reserves of energy. Midnight was approaching when the treasure-hunt was set going. Amid laughter, the guests dispersed about the house, and were soon to be found stooping to look in the sideboard or peering down the cellar steps.

The triumphant winner found he had tracked down a bottle of champagne, and immediately offered to share it out.

"Save some for Yvonne," begged Sylvia. "It's her favourite vintage."

"She'd better hurry up or she'll be unlucky. Where's she got to, anyway?"

"Yes," cried someone else, "and where's Tyler? Ah-ah, where's Tyler?"

A chorus of amused comment arose. Someone suggested they should institute a new treasure hunt to find the missing pair. Gregg looked vexed, and set down his champagne glass to go looking for Yvonne.

But before he reached the doorway of the sitting-room it was blocked by the two in question, standing there hand in hand. Something about their demeanour brought a gradual hush over the hilarious greeting they received.

Tyler led Yvonne forward. "You may have noticed," he said shyly, "that I didn't bring Yvonne a birthday present when I arrived. That was because what I wanted to give was rather special, and I had to ask first if she would accept it. I'm happy--more than happy--to say that she has. I'd like you all to see."

He took her left hand and held it out. On the third finger glittered a superb sapphire engagement ring.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ALISON's mother rushed forward and throwing her arms round Yvonne, kissed her effusively. A clamour of congratulations broke out. Only two voices were silent.

Alison was thinking only of Gregg. She worked her way round the excited group to the spot where he was standing. He seemed turned to stone, his face quite expressionless.

"Gregg?" she said fearfully, touching his sleeve.

Slowly he turned his head and looked down at her. He cleared his throat. "You were right after all," he said huskily. "Lucky for me you warned me. I didn't believe you, but at least I wasn't absolutely unprepared."

"I'm sorry," was all she could say.

He watched the happy couple surrounded by their friends. "But why like this?" he said, half aloud. "Why tonight, in front of a crowd of people?"

"I don't think she had any choice, Gregg. Tyler wanted to give the ring as a birthday present and naturally would expect her to wear it. So the engagement had to be announced."

"Sound reasoning," he acknowledged with irony. He gave her a wavering glance. "You take it very well? But then you really were expecting it. Whereas I . . . I never really imagined it could happen. Dear, dear, what a silly trusting nincompoop. Do I look as stupid as I feel?"

"You look as white as a sheet. Hadn't you better slip away now, while everybody is making a noise?"

"And let her know she knocked me for six? Not on your life." He looked down at the floor for a moment. "I'm not going to make an exhibition of myself, if that's what you're afraid of."

"I'm only thinking of you—it's silly to stay and make yourself utterly miserable just out of pride."

"Don't deny me that," he said grimly. "I have my pride left, if nothing else."

She saw he was adamant. She regretted his decision but it was his own to make. He stood, rather white but self-possessed, near the buffet table.

Tyler glanced over the heads of the group of well-wishers. "Hi there, you two!" he called. "Aren't you going to wish us luck?"

Alison murmured her good wishes. She did wish them well, for Tyler's sake if for no one else's. Gregg turned to the buffet and raised his champagne glass. "A toast," he announced. "Congratulations to the lucky man, and to the loveliest bride-to-be in England, all the happiness she deserves." He tilted his glass, but it never reached his lips. Somehow it seemed to slip through his fingers and smash into smithereens on the floor. He looked down at the shattered fragments. "An omen?" he wondered.

"Oh, don't say that!" Sylvia cried in alarm. "Nothing must darken this moment for our dear Yvonne."

Yvonne left Tyler's side as if to go to Gregg. "I'll get you something else," she suggested.

"No thanks, I'm resigned to doing without," he said lightly, and turned away.

They were caught up next in Sylvia's proposal for a "proper toast". People milled about finding glasses and in the mix-up Alison saw that Yvonne was trying to get to Gregg's side. Just as carefully, Gregg kept out of her way—only to end with Tyler at his elbow, overflowing with his newly acquired happiness. Alison joined them and tried to attract Tyler's conversation to herself. The toast was drunk. A record was put on the radiogram for the last dance. Tyler held out his hands to Yvonne, who went obediently into his arms. Gregg turned to Alison.

"Shall we sit this one out?" he murmured. "I've a silly feeling I'm going to keel over at any moment."

"Gregg, I do wish you'd go home—you really look—"

"I'll make it. Don't fret." He glanced at the couples circling lazily in the hall to the strains of the last waltz. "Tyler—poor

devil! He really believed she loves him." He shivered and looked away. "How could she do it?" he mumbled brokenly.

He went blindly out into the starlit garden and sank into a chair farthest away from the gay little rainbow of coloured lights on the trellis. Alison could no longer see his face. She stood beside him, one hand on his shoulder. He was shivering like a man with a fever. There was nothing she could do for him except stay quietly at his side.

After a moment he made an effort and rose to his feet. "It turns out you were right," he said. "I should have gone home. I wanted to say good night when the party ended and walk out with my head held high, but I'm just not going to make it. God, I wish I were dead. I've got to get out of here before I lay eyes on her again."

"You can go out by the back gate. Your car's at the corner, isn't it? You can be in it and away without the least difficulty. This way."

She walked across the yard and swung the gate open. Gregg stepped through and then wheeled, to laugh grimly. "*She's* the one who ought to be running away," he said. "But ordinary rules don't apply to Yvonne."

"Will you be all right, Gregg?"

"Meaning, will I get home in one piece? Don't worry, Alison."

Next moment he was gone. She closed the gate softly and went to sit down for a moment. She too felt unsure of herself, partially numbed by the shock of this evening's events.

The sound of the music drifted to her from indoors. In the way that often happens at the end of a successful party, the last dance was lengthening out to half an hour or more. Alison sat still, lost in thought.

Then a golden clad figure appeared at the open back door of the house. There was a hesitation while she tried to make out who was sitting there. Then she came out.

"Where's Gregg?" she asked swiftly.

"Why do you want to know?" Alison countered.

"I want to talk to him."

"You're unlucky. He doesn't want to talk to you."

"Not at the moment, perhaps. But soon he'll begin to ask himself if he was wise to avoid me. He'll want to hear what I have to say. It might as well be sooner than later. Where is he?"

"He's gone."

Yvonne moved restlessly. "How silly of him! Surely he must have known I'd want to talk to him?"

Alison sprang to her feet. "For a man who was supposedly forewarned of all your intentions, he seemed rather at a loss."

"You and he have been sympathizing with each other, have you? I've warned you before, Alison—don't interfere. Gregg belongs to me."

"Belongs to you? Even after tonight? You must be wildly insane to imagine he'll ever come near you again."

"You'll soon see," Yvonne replied with cold imperturbability. "The tie that binds the two of us together is stronger than anything you can possibly imagine. You don't know what love is—real love, that demands every fragment of your being! When a man like Gregg falls in love there are no half-way measures. He belongs to me, body and soul. He'll love me to the end of his life, even if he never sees me again. And when he learns that we needn't stop seeing each other it will be like finding something to live for after all. Oh yes, Gregg will come when I call. You'll see."

Despite herself, Alison was impressed—almost frightened—by the certainty of Yvonne's manner. Her cousin had spoken with an incisiveness that gave a cutting edge to every word, which made her description of Gregg's bondage cruelly convincing. "I pray that what you say is wrong," she replied painfully. "If a girl like you can dominate a man like Gregg—"

"If? You doubt it? Wait, my dear Alison—just wait. You'll see."

She turned and went back indoors again. When Alison next saw her she was in Tyler's arms, dancing to the soft strains of the very last waltz, her face upturned to his in the soft, radiant happiness of the newly-engaged girl. Watching her, Alison felt

defeated. Against so much self-assurance and such consummate acting, who could struggle?

Alison had the following day free, and was staying overnight at home. She learned at breakfast that Yvonne was to spend the week-end with Tyler's mother in their country home in Buckinghamshire, a farming estate called Ames Place. Tyler was expected to fetch Yvonne about midday, but strangely Yvonne was up and dressed long before that hour, despite the late night. Alison was surprised, for Yvonne generally disliked getting up before she must.

She discovered the reason when, passing through the hall on her way to the kitchen, she heard Yvonne speak into the telephone in a low voice. "Hello? Crownham District? Put me through to Mr. Danton, please."

Alison stood still. Presently Yvonne replaced the receiver; then realizing she wasn't alone, she looked round.

"He has this week-end off," Alison informed her calmly.

"It doesn't matter. We had a date for tomorrow. I just wanted to tell him I'm going to Ames Place for the week-end."

"I imagine he'd already guessed his date with you was cancelled," Alison studied her cousin. "You're not as sure of yourself as you pretend. You want to get in touch with Gregg as soon as you can, to try to repair the damage you've done."

"I'm not worried about it," Yvonne replied. "But after all I am going to be away until at least Monday. If he rings while I'm gone—"

"He won't ring," Alison said with certainty.

"Oh yes he will," Yvonne returned. "And if I were here to answer the telephone, everything would soon be all right."

"If your magic is really so strong as you imagine," Alison suggested, "a day or two's delay should make no difference."

"You're quite right. But it's likely to be more than a day or two. I'm not going back to work at the hospital. Tyler prefers that I should give up my job. He was never keen on the idea of letting me be in contact with the unhappy side of life, and naturally I shall fall in with his wishes."

"With heartfelt reluctance, I feel sure."

"As you say," she agreed coolly. "However, common politeness demands that I should let Gregg know. Otherwise he might get the mistaken impression that I've given up my job to avoid seeing him."

"Whereas quite the contrary is the case?"

"Quite the contrary is the case. I'm really rather anxious to see him. Tell him that on Monday, will you?"

"I'm sorry," demurred Alison. "I refuse to be made an accessory to this cruel scheme you intend to carry out on Gregg."

"What harm can there be in simply giving him a message? Do you imagine that by refusing to give it you can prevent us from meeting?" Yvonne gave her a gentle smile and went on her way upstairs.

After she had left with Tyler the house had a strange feeling—as if it were waiting for something. Alison and her mother were at work most of the day tidying up after the party and shopping for the week-end. For the evening Alison had a tentative date with a group of friends, and was waiting for one of them to ring and confirm it. The phone rang about six-thirty.

But it was Gregg who spoke.

"I wanted to know—Is she there? Can she hear you speak to me?"

"No, she's gone away for the week-end. Did you want her?"

"God, no. I wanted to talk to you, Alison. I'll go mad if I don't talk to someone. Are you free this evening? Could you spare me an hour?"

"Yes, of course—gladly, Gregg. Do you want to come here?"

"I'd rather you came out."

"I quite understand. Where shall I meet you?"

"At the corner of the square? Alison, I'm not offering you an evening's entertainment—are you sure you don't mind?"

"My dear, I'm glad to come. At the corner of the square—when?"

"As soon as you like. I'm quite close at hand. I've been wandering around all day."

She called to her mother that she was going out, and slipped out of the house at once. Diagonally across the square, beyond the little central garden with its dusty trees, she could see Gregg's tall figure. When she joined him they fell into step in silence and began to walk towards the Thames. In one of the little embankment gardens they found a quiet bench facing a bronze statue to some long-dead worthy.

"What I can't understand," Gregg said, leaning back wearily, "is why she bothered with me at all. There must always have been a danger that Tyler would object to her friendship with me."

"She kept the two things in separate compartments, Gregg. I don't suppose Tyler had the least idea she saw you except at the hospital during working hours."

"Looking back, I do seem to trace an unwillingness on her part to bring Tyler and me together if it could be avoided. Do you remember that first time he came to dinner at your house? I'm convinced now that I wasn't intended to be there. Do you think I was?"

"No, I don't think you were, Gregg."

"She accounted for him so easily, though, and I believed it all without question. 'Brotherly affection', she said he felt for her. She poked fun at him, you know. Yet all the time she must have intended to marry him." There was a long interval during which Alison could sense his struggle for words to express the turmoil of bitter thoughts that had surged within him all day. "What makes me feel such an imbecile," he said savagely, "is the way she took me in. I believed she loved me. I really believed it."

"It would be best not to think about it—"

"It would, wouldn't it? But how is it to be achieved? Everywhere I look, everything I do, reminds me of her. She was the hub of my life. It revolved around her. I thought it would always be that way. I thought we were made for each other. I told you so—remember?—when you tried to warn me that she'd choose Tyler."

"I remember the things you said. The fact remains that you have to find a way to live without her."

"But don't you understand, she's shaken my whole world into ruins? I was wrong about her, utterly, incredibly wrong. I believed her when she said she loved me. And she did say it, Alison—time and again . . ." He faltered into silence for a moment. "I was completely taken in," he resumed in self-disdain. "I've lost faith in Yvonne and in myself—in my own judgement. I can't tell the counterfeit from the real."

"Perhaps her feelings for you weren't all counterfeit, Gregg. Perhaps, in her way, Yvonne really loved you—"

"Only I wasn't rich enough and I hadn't a title." His voice was hard. "That's a great comfort. For weeks I've been idolizing a girl who's ready to throw every decent feeling overboard for money and social position. And the worst of it is, I still can't bring myself to accept it. I have a sort of waking nightmare that the next time I see her I'll break down and plead with her to say it's all been a mistake."

"You needn't see her if you don't want to," Alison replied, watching him anxiously as she spoke. "She won't be coming back to the hospital."

His mouth tightened in a smile of contempt. "So she has some spark of decency after all. Or is it just that she hasn't the courage?"

"I don't think she lacks the courage to meet you, Gregg. In fact I think you ought to be prepared for the fact that she'll try to get in touch with you."

"Try to get in touch with me?" he repeated in surprise. "But what for?" Then he gave another little smile. "Don't tell me she wants to apologize!"

"No, she won't apologize."

He gave Alison a sharp glance. "Do you know why she wants to see me?"

"I—she did speak of it to me, but—Just be on your guard, Gregg, that's all."

"But against what? What more can she do?"

"She could—she might—try to explain—rekindle some hope—remember you yourself said she loved you, Gregg."

"But she's marrying Tyler. What are you talking about? Between Yvonne and myself, everything's at an end."

Alison made no reply.

Gregg took her by one shoulder and turned her so that he could look at her. "What are you talking about?" he insisted. "Does she imagine we can meet as 'friends'? She and I—? Is that what she means?"

"When she sees you—and she will find a way to meet you and talk to you, Gregg, make no mistake about that!—she'll tell you what she has in mind."

"But she has no need to bother about me now. She's got what she wanted in life—a rich and important man for a husband."

"How do you know that's all she wants?"

"How do I know? By the evidence of my own eyes. I loved her and she loved me, but what I offered wasn't enough. Last night, that ring she wore on her finger was the evidence of what she considered important. I could never have bought her a ring like that. I would have given everything I had in the world to make her happy, but it wouldn't have bought a ring like that."

"What you're saying isn't quite true, Gregg," she objected. "She wanted you to change your profession, but you couldn't do it. So you see it's not the exact truth when you say you would have given everything to make her happy."

He caught his breath. "Is that what she wants? Is that why she's gone so far as to get engaged to Tyler? To force me into a step like that?" He sprang to his feet and walked away a few paces. Then over his shoulder he said, "Whatever else she is, surely she's not a blackmailer."

"No, no, Gregg—I didn't say that was what she wanted." She got up and went to stand at his elbow. "I think Yvonne understood almost from the outset that you couldn't be changed in that respect. Her plan took that into account."

"What plan?" He wheeled. "What plan? What do you know of her plans?"

"Nothing—at least—not much—"

"That's not true, Alison. You've been right all along about Yvonne. By some sixth sense you've guessed at what she wanted and what she intended to do. Or—or has she actually told you her plans?"

"She did tell me something. A little. You see, I've tried to argue with her on more than one occasion. I've been alarmed at things I've seen. I was worried about my mother's health and other family matters, and so I talked to Yvonne. And in reply she—well, she said one or two things."

"About marrying Tyler, for example. You knew about that before it happened."

"Yes."

"And now you have advance notice of something else she's got in mind. What is it, Alison?"

"Please don't cross-question me like this, Gregg—"

"It's something to do with me, isn't it? Somehow I'm to be brought to heel . . . I don't understand it. Alison, for the love of heaven, put me out of my misery. What further torture has Yvonne in store for me?"

All at once she realized that she was being borne along to an inevitable conclusion: she had to tell Gregg what she knew of Yvonne's intentions. There was no other way out. She had said too much to go back now. And perhaps she owed him that much. She had done little to help him hitherto—she had let him walk blindfold into Yvonne's enchanted woods. But now, if she could, she must finally break the spell of the enchantress.

She took Gregg's hand. "Come and sit down again," she commanded. "What I'm going to say isn't pretty, and you won't like it. I'm going to speak about Yvonne without pretence—I'm not going to spare your feelings. You'll hate me when it's over, but it can't be helped."

He sat down at her side and studied her with incredulous attention. "I'm going to hate *you*?" he said. "Are you joking?"

"Remember that you still love Yvonne. No matter how she's hurt you, you haven't yet ceased to love her. Perhaps you never will. She herself says you'll always belong to her."

"She certainly doesn't underestimate her power," he remarked angrily.

"No, and you shouldn't underestimate it either, Gregg. Do you recall the first day you saw her? You fell completely under her spell in that first moment. Against her will, she fell in love with you too during that first few days. In a way it was my family's fault—"

"Your family? How on earth—"

"She thought that any friend of ours must be well-born and probably not penniless. You remember how you wondered about some of the odd things she said about us Blakelocks? She really thought that in coming to us she was coming to a life of luxury and gaiety—"

"Alison! I thought that was just a mad idea of mine—"

"No, it was true enough. She turned to Tyler as a means of bettering her condition. But in the interval she had fallen in love with you. Deeply in love—so deeply that she felt she couldn't give you up."

"You really believe that she still loves me," Gregg muttered, tightening his grasp on her hand.

"Oh yes, she loves you. She wishes she didn't, but she does."

"Yet you say that she truly intends to marry Tyler? It isn't a ruse to scare me into obedience?"

"No, because even if you gave up medicine it's doubtful if you could make enough money to give her the life she wants—not within the foreseeable future. Tyler on the other hand is offering her, *now*, exactly what she wants—plenty of money, a social background of distinction, and a simple trusting faith in her which will make it magnificently easy for her to deceive him."

She stopped. She waited. Gregg said slowly "Deceive . . . ?"

"The way Yvonne looks at it, Gregg, marriage with Tyler need not make the slightest difference to her feelings for you—or yours for her, if you'll only do as she wants."

As soon as she had actually put it into words for him she wished it unsaid. A sudden blaze came into his eyes, turning

them into burning brown furnaces of fury. He took her by the shoulders. He shook her.

"You're making this up!" he ground out.

"No, Gregg. I swear it."

"You're lying. How dare you say that about her?"

She took a moment before she answered. Then she said quietly, despite the agony of his cruel fingers in her shoulders, "I told you you would hate me for it."

Slowly, as if in a dream, he let her go. A stunned, stricken look was coming into his face. He shook his head.

"It just isn't true."

"Don't let it hurt you, Gregg. She isn't worth it."

"You've got it all wrong. That's not the kind of feeling we had for each other. I tell you, we had plans—dreams—"

"I know that, my dear. But you see, for Yvonne dreams can never come true unless they have a firm foundation of hard cash. All the same, she loves you. That's true—you were right to believe it when she told you. She doesn't want to give you up and she doesn't see why she should."

"She said this to you?"

"Yes, Gregg, she did."

"But we couldn't—I want to make her my *wife*, not my partner in a hole-and-corner love affair. My god, we *couldn't* do that—not to Tyler!"

"That was my first reaction. Yvonne replied that so long as Tyler never knew he could never be hurt. And of course she would take very great care he never knew."

Gregg clasped his hands between his knees and sat looking down at the tarmac path. The evening sun was glinting through the trees. A Thames lighter hustled by on the river's brown water.

Eventually Alison said quietly, "This is what Yvonne wants to tell you when she sees you. Perhaps it's as well you should know in advance."

He nodded without looking up. "You know," he said, "when you've put someone on a pedestal as I had put Yvonne, there's a distance between you. When you discover that after all your idol

is only human, what happens? She steps down from the pedestal." He turned to stare at Alison. "And becomes easily attainable."

She felt a chill of alarm. "But you wouldn't want to 'attain' something so valueless?"

He didn't reply directly. Then he said with swift decision, "I've got to get away. I've got to clear out, somewhere where she can't get in touch with me."

"You mean run away?"

He managed a twisted smile. "You can call me coward if you want to. You could be right about it. All I know is that if Yvonne were to come to me and tell me we needn't say goodbye . . ."

"You wouldn't agree to it?" she faltered.

"Think not?" he said wily. "Then you've got greater faith in my strength of character than I have myself."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WITHIN ten days Gregg had gone. His two years as junior registrar at Crownham District were due to expire in any case and for some weeks past he had been considering what he ought to do. He explained to Alison that he had had the prospect of a post as Senior Registrar at a hospital in one of the new towns, but had put off a 'decision because it would have meant leaving Yvonne.

"I knew life in Bradlow New Town wouldn't appeal to Yvonne. I didn't want to take the job and be tied there for four years, miles away from her. So I didn't even mention it to her."

"Bradlow New Town Hospital is quite a show place, from all I hear. You'll have wonderful equipment and plenty of scope to experiment with new techniques."

"Yes, from the job point of view I've been lucky." He sighed, and summoned up a rueful smile. "Lucky in work, unlucky in love. And I wonder if it's the correct attitude—to take a job just to get away from an impossible situation here in London?"

"Don't feel like that about it," Alison protested. "Had you never met Yvonne you'd have taken this post at Bradlow like a shot."

"That's true. And once I get there, perhaps it will be as if I had never met her. Perhaps a miracle will happen, and she'll cease to be important."

"I wouldn't bank on a miracle, Gregg. And besides, don't imagine you'll get off so easily. Yvonne will find some excuse to come and see you."

"She'll find that difficult."

"How do you mean?"

"She won't know where I am."

"But she can easily find out—"

"No, I don't think so. I've let the idea get around that I'm

going on a prolonged motoring holiday before I take up a new post. You're the only person who knows where I'm really going. And I hope you'll keep it to yourself."

Alison looked doubtful. "I still say she can find out—"

"Only later on, when I write to the Management Committee to tell them I've settled in at Bradlow. I don't think it will occur to her to make official inquiries—at least not for a while. By that time—you never know—I may have developed a certain immunity."

"Immunity generally comes from constant contact."

"Meaning you think I ought to stay and face it out?" He sighed. "I know you think I'm a spineless deserter. I'm not very fond of myself, even, just at present. If it were only my own life I were playing around with, I might try outfacing Yvonne. But suppose I stay, and suppose I—I— There's Tyler to consider, you know. No, it's best to clear out. At least one thing is certain," he added with desperate humour, "it's *safer* to clear out."

Alison never mentioned his departure to Yvonne, who went on her predetermined way with apparent unconcern. Once Alison's mother, prompted no doubt by Yvonne, suggested that Gregg might like to come to dinner. Alison made a vague excuse about staff difficulties due to summer holidays, and the subject was dropped.

Soon the conversation in the house at Crownham Square was about nothing except wedding arrangements. whether or not to have a choir, the trousseau, the going-away outfit, and the choice of a honeymoon spot. Yvonne favoured Venice. Tyler had suggested New York, which had attracted Yvonne until she remembered how hot and stuffy New York was reputed to be. "Besides," she told her aunt, "Tyler has business there. I don't want to combine my honeymoon with a business trip."

"You could go later in the year—in November, perhaps."

"Or Tyler could go on his own," said Yvonne thoughtfully. "And leave me in London."

"Should you like that so soon after your marriage, though, dear?"

"I shouldn't mind a bit," Yvonne replied. Adding as an after-thought, "I'll have the house to furnish and that sort of thing."

Alison was able to avoid having to listen to evasions of that sort by simply staying away from her home.

Three weeks after the engagement was announced, Alison was just coming out of the ward to go for her coffee-break when Yvonne came hurrying into the corridor. She seemed on the point of seizing Alison by the arm, but checked herself.

"Hello, my dear," she greeted her. "Free for a minute?"

The last thing Alison ever expected was to hear her cousin call her "my dear." "I'm just going into the kitchen to make some coffee," she replied guardedly.

"Have you some to spare for me? I'm parched."

"I can make plenty."

Yvonne followed her into the ward kitchen and watched in silence while the coffee was made in thick hospital cups. As Alison handed one to her, she met Yvonne's eye frankly.

"Well now," she remarked, "suppose you tell me what it is you want."

"Goodness, what a suspicious nature you have!" Yvonne laughed. "I thought I'd drop in on you, that's all. We never seem to see you at home these days. I've been collecting a few belongings I left in the X-ray Clinic so I thought I'd come up for a chat."

"About what?" Alison parried.

Her cousin studied her intently. "You've changed," she announced after a moment. "I used to make you unsure of yourself. Now you speak in quite a different tone to me."

"That's because I've been proved right in distrusting you. It's no use glossing over the fact, Yvonne. Between us there can be no more pretence. I know you for what you are, and though for Mother's sake I don't want an open break, the less I see you and speak to you the better I shall like it."

Yvonne's eyes filled with what looked like perfectly genuine tears. "Don't be so hard on me," she begged. "I'm so unhappy."

"Whose fault is that?"

"My own, I admit it. That's why I came here today. I've

reached the stage where I can't play a waiting game any longer. But they tell me Gregg's left the hospital."

"So he has."

"Without a word to me?"

"On the face of it, Gregg's got no reason to think you're interested in his comings and goings now you're engaged to someone else."

"Didn't you give him my message? That I wanted to see him?"

"I told you I wouldn't act as a go-between."

"But I've got to see him. I can't go on without seeing him. I asked downstairs, but no one seems to know where he's gone."

"Perhaps that was his intention."

"You mean he's avoiding me? I'll soon put a stop to such nonsense."

Luckily at that moment Sister Chalfont put a plump face round the door to complain that she hadn't had her coffee yet. Sister was a married woman who had returned to nursing after marrying off three pretty daughters; knowing Yvonne slightly and having heard the hospital gossip about the forthcoming wedding, she was all agog to hear more. She immediately monopolized Yvonne, and Alison thankfully made her escape.

She was doubtful if the matter would end there. If Yvonne so desperately wanted to see Gregg that she would deign to come to the hospital looking for him, she wouldn't give up so easily. But the rest of the day's work went without incident.

She was just about to begin on a leisurely evening's hand-care, with her manicure set arranged in readiness and a new shade of nail polish waiting to be tried, when the housemaid knocked on her room door.

"Visitor for you, staff nurse. In the visitor's lounge. A young lady who says she's your cousin."

Her heart sank. Snatching at a faint hope that with other people present Yvonne might be hindered, she asked, "Is there anyone else in the lounge?"

"No, miss, you're lucky, it's empty at the moment."

Sighing, she tightened the cap of the newly-opened polish

bottle and followed the maid downstairs. Yvonne was standing by one of the cretonne-draped windows, the fading September sunlight catching her halo of fine soft hair. Alison came in, carefully leaving the door open: she wanted to avoid an entirely confidential interview if she possibly could. But Yvonne wasn't to be deterred by such manoeuvres. She turned from the window and stepping past Alison, firmly closed the door.

"I've got to talk to you," she began at once. "I asked Sister Chalfont for Gregg's new address. I thought for sure he'd have told his friends on the staff of the main surgical ward where he was going. But Sister Chalfont didn't know."

"The impression is that he's going to have a long holiday before applying for a new post."

"But what sort of post did he think of applying for? Whereabouts?"

"I should have thought that, before you brought matters to a sudden and ghastly end by accepting Tyler, you and Gregg must often have discussed plans for the future. You ought to have a better idea than anyone else where he might go."

"But—now that he's gone, so suddenly—and without getting in touch with me, without even saying goodbye—"

"All the goodbyes were said between you and Gregg at your birthday party," Alison reminded her quietly.

"But surely he couldn't have been such a fool as to believe that was the end of everything between us?"

"I'm afraid that's exactly the kind of a fool he is. Only I prefer to think that he's the sensible one, and you are the fool. How could you really believe that Gregg would hang around waiting to play the third partner in a shabby triangle drama? He's not the type."

"You don't know what type he is," Yvonne said scornfully. "You love him with all your heart and soul yet you know nothing about him."

"I don't know all there is to know," she admitted. "But I know more than you do. Gregg's honest to the core. It was his very honesty and openness that made him such an easy victim for

you. He simply couldn't envisage the kind of double-crossing plan you had in the lovely head of yours."

"All right, he couldn't envisage it. But once I see him and explain it to him we'll see which of us understands him best. He'll grab the chance with both hands. He'd do anything rather than lose me completely. I know, because he feels about me as I do about him—life without him is almost meaningless."

"Then why don't you give up this insane idea of marrying Tyler? You and Gregg could still be happy together."

"On what Gregg earns? Are you joking?" Yvonne shrugged with angry vehemence. "I can't live the sort of life I need on a pittance like that. I'd make his life a misery. Don't you see, Alison? It's because I love Gregg so much that I couldn't condemn him to an attempt at a conventional middle-class marriage with me. It would crash within six months."

"Your marriage with Tyler will crash just as quickly. He'll bore you to death and he'll soon realize it. Tyler's not the fool you take him for, you know."

"But I shan't be bored, as long as everything works out according to my plan. I shall have surroundings that give me pleasure, all the money I need—and I shall have Gregg too."

Alison shook her head. "No, your calculations are wrong there."

"And I tell you I'm right! All I have to do is explain to Gregg that there's no need to think the end has come, and he'll see how silly he's been to give up hope. Once he hears how easily it can all be worked out, everything will be fine. He'll be happy again."

"Happy?" Alison cried. "You must be mad to use a word like that! When Gregg heard what you had in mind it nearly broke his heart! Yet you think you know him better than—"

"You told him?" Yvonne cut in, her voice suddenly climbing. "You told him?"

"Yes, I told him. He wanted someone to talk to the day after the birthday party, and in the end I was forced to explain—"

"Forced! Oh yes, I can imagine you were reluctant to have it

dragged out of you! You probably revelled in the chance to put everything in its worst possible light!"

"I didn't revel in it. Having to tell him a thing like that was like driving a knife into him. And if your character suffered in the telling, whose fault is that? The whole scheme is despicable from beginning to end."

"But you don't understand!" Yvonne cried, in a real agony of appeal. "You don't—you can't understand! I love Gregg. I can't give him up. There's nothing despicable in loving a man as much as I love Gregg."

Alison stared at her. There was no doubting her utter sincerity. She honestly believed that, because she loved Gregg so greatly, she was entitled to enter into a sham marriage with another man for the sake of his money and deceive him without compunction. The straightforward solution of an honest, hard-working marriage with Gregg made no sense to Yvonne. Gregg had no money, therefore she couldn't be happy in such a marriage, therefore such a marriage was out of the question.

For the first time Alison began to appreciate Gregg's wisdom in putting himself out of Yvonne's reach. She had thought it a cowardly wisdom until now, but if she—who tended to dislike and distrust her cousin—could be moved by her appeal, what effect might it have on a man who loved her? His own desires would be reinforced by pity for Yvonne's genuine unhappiness—and disaster could easily follow.

Yvonne was still talking, her voice thick with tears. "Tell me what he said! Was he unhappy? I know he must have been—but he shouldn't have gone away! What did he say?"

"He said the best thing was to clear out of your life altogether. And I think he was right."

"But didn't he understand that I wanted to speak to him myself?"

"He went away expressly to avoid that. And that's why he's left no forwarding address."

Yvonne stepped close to Alison, staring up from intent blue eyes. "But you know where he is," she challenged.

"Yes, I know where he is."

"Tell me, then! You've got to tell me!"

"It's no use, Yvonne. I haven't the slightest intention of helping you drag him into a miserable intrigue."

"But I've got to see him! I'll die if I don't see him. You don't understand what he means to me!"

"If he means so much to you you'd be prepared to give up this ghastly plan to marry Tyler."

"All right then!" Yvonne exclaimed desperately. "I promise! I promise I'll give it all up for Gregg's sake! I'll break off the engagement—I'll do anything you say—only tell me where Gregg is!"

Alison studied the ravaged yet beautiful face upturned towards her. Whatever else was in doubt, Yvonne's need of Gregg was genuine enough. Nothing else would have made her humble herself to plead like this. Perhaps, after all, this ardent devotion might lead to a happy ending.

"All right, I'll write down the address for you."

As Yvonne sank down on a chair, hiding her face on hands clasped on its back, Alison went to a table where writing materials were laid out. She wrote swiftly, and folded the paper, turning as she did so. She was just in time to see the vanishing wraith of a little smile of triumph behind her cousin's tears. She rose slowly, the folded note in her hands.

Yvonne jumped up. She leaned forward to take the paper.

"No, just a minute!" Alison said in a tone of command.

Yvonne froze instantly. "What's the matter? Give it to me. You promised to give it to me!"

"I promised, and I will give it to you. But you promised something in exchange, remember?"

"And I'll do what I promised, I swear I will! I'll tell Tyler the wedding's off. I'll tell him tonight. I'll go straight there when I leave here."

"His flat? He's there now? He's not out of town?"

"No, no, I give you my word—he's at home entertaining some German song-writer. I'll go straight there."

"There's no need," said Alison. She turned back to the writing table, picked up the telephone, and held it out. "Ring him now."

Yvonne backed away. "I couldn't do it now."

"Why not?"

"I mean—I couldn't do it on the telephone. It would be too cruel. I must tell him personally, face to face."

"Very praiseworthy. You'll go tonight?"

"Yes, yes, I'll go tonight. Now give me the paper."

"I'll give you this paper," Alison said slowly, "when you come back here and tell me the engagement with Tyler is at an end. Say, in about two hours' time."

Yvonne seemed to make a tremendous effort for her self-control. "Very well," she answered. "I'll go straight to Tyler's flat, and I'll come straight back. But you promise you'll give me that address when I come back?"

"After I've rung Tyler to confirm that the wedding will not take place—yes, I will."

And then it was out. One look at the hate and despair on Yvonne's face told her with irrefutable certainty that the whole thing had been a trick. Yvonne had never intended to keep her side of the bargain.

She edged towards Alison. "Give me that paper," she said in a low tone, full of suppressed fury. "Give it to me!"

For answer Alison tore the note in four, in eight. Before she could reduce the scraps any further Yvonne sprang forward to seize them, but knocked them instead from Alison's fingers. The breeze that was flapping the curtains seized the fragments and tossed them about the room like a make-believe snowstorm. Some even went dancing out of the open window.

Yvonne fell on her knees and began to pick up the scraps. But piece after piece was blank notepaper. Two lines of writing on a sheet of paper—and so many pieces spread about the room, and some even flying down into the bushes below the window . . . It was a hopeless task.

She threw down the pieces she had collected and remained for a moment where she was. Then, with the grace of a panther,

she came up on to her feet once more. And there was something panther-like in the eyes that stared at Alison.

For the first time in her life Alison felt a stab of real fear. This girl truly hated her. She had made an implacable enemy.

"Don't think I'll let you go scot-free," Yvonne said just above a whisper. "No one does a thing like that to me without regretting it bitterly. I know how to make you suffer, and I'll see that you do."

She went to the door. There she turned.

"If it takes me the rest of my days," she whispered, "I'll make you pay for this!"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE wedding was now three weeks away. Alison still went home as seldom as possible, but was forced to change her attitude by a telephone call from her mother.

"I wish you'd come and have a look at Yvonne, dear," she suggested in her plaintive way. "She keeps saying she'll be perfectly all right, but my goodness she doesn't look it."

"What's wrong with the way she looks?"

"Well, although she uses her make-up beautifully, she looks pale and her eyes seem bigger—sort of sunk back in hollows. And she eats almost nothing. Of course it's probably pre-wedding nerves, I quite understand that. But when I try to persuade her to rest she pays no heed, and I'm so afraid she'll crack up before her wedding-day. Alison, I wish you'd come and see."

"But what good would it do if I did?"

"Darling, you're a nurse. She'd listen to you."

"Oh no she wouldn't."

"At least you'd be able to advise me. Your father and I are at our wits' ends."

"All right," Alison agreed reluctantly.

Yet despite this forewarning she was shocked when she saw Yvonne. The girl really looked ill. She had lost weight, and the skin over her facial bones was tense and strained. It seemed to Alison that only an iron will-power kept her cousin from flaring out at her Aunt Sylvia's well-meaning attempts to be kind.

Against her own judgement, Alison decided to have one more try at reasoning with the girl. She sought an opportunity while her parents were unpacking yet another wedding gift in the already crowded dining-room. Yvonne was in the sitting-room, checking off acceptances of the wedding invitations against a list she held in a trembling hand.

"Don't go on with it, Yvonne," she said simply. "You'll destroy yourself."

Yvonne slowly turned her eyes away from her task. "It's you who are destroying me. Tell me where to find Gregg."

"You know the condition. I'll tell you where Gregg is if you break off your engagement with Tyler."

"Don't be absurd," her cousin said drily. "How can I break it off now? The invitations have all gone out and been accepted, the house is full of wedding presents. How can I back out now?"

"The invitations can be cancelled and the gifts sent back."

"And I should be a laughing stock."

"Does that matter?"

"I won't let you or anyone else turn me into a figure of fun."

"Yvonne, all I'm trying to do is help you."

Yvonne laughed mirthlessly. "After our last interview I find that hard to believe."

"You seem to think of me as an enemy, but I'm not, Yvonne. If you and Gregg can have at least an even chance of happiness, then I'm willing to do all I can to help. Think what you're doing! You're not twenty yet. And you're tying yourself to a man you scarcely care about, while all the time the man you really love is eating his heart out for you."

"Oh, tell me where he is!" Yvonne implored in a sudden burst of anguish. "Unless I see him soon, I shall die."

Alison took the invitation list from her shaking hand and turned in her chair to face her. "Tyler is due in a few minutes. Tell him it's all been a mistake. He won't argue or reproach you. One look at you is enough to tell him the strain you're under. That in itself justifies calling off the wedding."

There was a sudden wavering expression on Yvonne's face. For the first time uncertainty took hold on her. For the first time, perhaps, she saw as a real possibility the idea of rejecting Tyler and all that he stood for.

Alison judged it best to say nothing more. Yvonne must make her own decision. With luck a few minutes of Tyler's unconsciously

irritating conversation tonight would drive her to take the step what would free her for the man she really loved.

But luck was not on Alison's side. When Tyler arrived he brought with him some family jewellery which had just been newly set at his mother's instructions for the new Lady Ames. They were beautiful things—a necklace of exquisitely cut diamonds, a bracelet to match, a diamond and ruby brooch. Seeing Yvonne take them out of their cases, watching her face light up as she ran the river of fire that was the necklace through her hands, Alison knew that her cousin would never give them up to marry a poor man.

Throughout dinner the excitement of the jewellery kept Yvonne on a crest of bright good humour. But perhaps it took too great a toll of her energy. Afterwards she was less lively. A morose note of impatience crept into some of her remarks.

"Mother phoned today to ask if you'd like some home-grown orange blossom to wear with your wedding-dress," Tyler remarked. "She has some she grew herself—it's in the hothouse at Ames Place."

"I'm afraid an orange blossom wreath would look inappropriate with my veil," Yvonne replied shortly.

"Oh, I didn't mean as a bridal wreath. I don't think there'd be enough for that. No, mother thought you'd like a sprig to wear on your dress, for luck."

"Luck? Only fools rely on luck," Yvonne declared.

Tyler dropped the subject. But his troubled eyes rested almost continuously on Yvonne's strained face, and when they left the dining-room he caught Alison by the arm.

"I'd like to speak to you," he said in a whisper.

"What about?" she replied, startled.

"About Yvonne."

"Now?"

"No, that would be difficult. Could I see you for a few minutes tomorrow?"

"I'm on duty all day."

"Then I'll tell you what—I'll offer you a lift back to your hospital this evening. How about that?"

"Won't it look a bit odd?"

"Why should it? I've given you a lift before."

"Yes, but in those days it didn't mean leaving the home of your fiancée about an hour before you need."

"It's all right—I have a good excuse."

About ten o'clock, he announced he had to get home to take a transatlantic telephone call he was expecting. He insisted on it with so much authority that Alison began to believe in it herself. Offered a lift back to the hospital she accepted without any appearance of undue eagerness.

"Now then," he said as soon as they had set off, "what's wrong with Yvonne?"

She hesitated. She wondered what, if anything, he suspected. "Why do you ask that question of me in particular?"

"Partly because you're a nurse. Partly because whatever is upsetting Yvonne has something to do with you."

"Has she said so?"

"No, but I can sense it. When she speaks of you, there's a certain tone of voice—it's as if she takes care to empty any trace of feeling out of her speech. Have you two had a quarrel?"

"Surely you don't think a quarrel with me would upset Yvonne to that extent?"

"I don't know. She's an exceptionally sensitive girl. And it would depend what the quarrel was about. Mind you, I don't pretend to understand the way a woman's mind works. All I'm saying is that I wish the pair of you would kiss and make up."

"I don't think any reconciliation of that kind would make the slightest difference to Yvonne's state of mind."

"Then what the dickens is the matter?"

"Why don't you ask Yvonne?"

"Do you think I haven't? All I do is irritate her. Alison, I never saw such a change come over anyone as over Yvonne in the last two or three weeks. I don't mind telling you I'm scared. Your mother keeps on insisting it's pre-wedding nerves but

when I suggested to Yvonne that we could postpone the wedding if she liked, the idea only seemed to make her worse. Your father tells me he had the same reactions. I don't know what to do for the best."

For the first time Alison began to look at things from Tyler's point of view. Oh, it was easy enough to say "Poor Tyler"—but now for the first time it began to dawn on her what distress he was in. And how much more unhappiness lay ahead for him.

"There's one comfort," he went on. "Since she insists on going on with the wedding plans, it means that whatever is upsetting her is nothing to do with our marriage. Once we're man and wife I hope she'll confide in me, and I'll be able to straighten out her troubles, whatever they are."

She felt tears prick behind her eyes at so much simple good-heartedness. "I ought to tell him," she thought. "Someone ought to tell him. It's not fair—it's not right—!"

But would he believe her? Yvonne had asked that very question and Alison didn't know the answer. And, moreover, was it Alison's place to speak?"

The big American car drew up outside the hospital. "Well, my dear, I'm sorry you haven't been able to shed any light on the mystery," he said ruefully, unfolding his great length to get out of the car and help her out. "And I do apologize for talking so much about my troubles."

"I only wished I could have helped more."

"You have helped, just by listening. I've got no one I can really talk to, you see. My mother is taken up with managing the estate, and besides, I shouldn't care to alarm her because she thinks the world of Yvonne. It's been a relief to find a kind listener." He offered his hand and smiled down at her. "There's something awfully kind and sincere about you, Alison," he murmured. "Thanks for everything."

Thanks for everything! She was letting him walk into a marriage that could only end in catastrophe, and he thanked her for her good intentions! She couldn't sleep when she got to her room; her conscience kept her awake. After hours of tossing and turning,

she got out of bed, found her writing-pad and pen, and tried to set her thoughts down for the consideration of the one person who could do anything to help Tyler.

"Dear Gregg", she wrote. "Tonight Tyler brought me home in his car so as to have a chance to talk to me about Yvonne. She is on the verge of break-down; she can't forget you, although she's still determined to marry Tyler. Gregg, do you think it's right to let him throw his life away like this? A man so kind and honest—does he deserve to be abandoned to someone who only wants his money? For Yvonne cares so little for him!—less than I do, I feel sure. I can foresee nothing but disaster, yet I haven't the courage to speak. What shall I do? Advise me, Gregg—help me!" She pulled a coat on and ran down to slip this letter in the collecting box in the hall. A little comforted by having done at least something for Tyler's sake, she went back to bed and at length fell asleep.

Two days later she went home at her mother's urgent request to inspect the millinery for the wedding. Sylvia had had two hats made for herself, neither of which she liked on completion. The wedding was now very near. Sylvia was in a panic about what to wear.

If possible the house was crammed even tighter with wedding presents. They stood about in the hall, waiting to be unpacked. Alison's father was at work on one, bringing out handfuls of wood shavings which littered the hall and clung to his suit. Alison thought he looked harassed and unhappy, but he looked more cheerful when he saw who was coming in at the front door.

"Glad to see you, my dear," he announced, offering his cheek for her kiss. "I hope you've come to bring a bit of order out of this hoo-ha. This house is like bedlam."

"Oh, cheer up. Not long now."

"If it's like this a week before, what will it be like on the day?" He caught his daughter's hand as she patted his sleeve comfortingly. "Listen, Alison, see if you can talk a bit of sense into your mother. She's driving herself to distraction with all this work and worry."

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs crying over another hat." He made a sound of exasperation. "We should never have agreed to have the reception here. It's too much for her. We should have had it at an hotel and hang the expense. Although I must say," he added uneasily, "I'm dreading the bills that'll come in even with the reception at home."

"We'll work it out somehow," Alison soothed.

"I'm sure I hope so." He sighed and knelt again to his packing case. Alison went upstairs.

Two hours later she had re-trimmed one of the unsuitable hats so that it framed Sylvia's thin face to perfection. Yvonne and Tyler had come in from house-hunting in Chelsea, so Eric came upstairs to say; and in honour of the occasion he proposed to make some tea and cinnamon toast, which was his one culinary speciality. Alison and Sylvia came downstairs, and they ranged themselves almost like a family group round the first fire of the autumn.

Glancing about at them, Alison thought that they scarcely looked like people with a joyful occasion ahead of them. Sylvia looked tired; Eric's forehead seemed permanently furrowed. Yvonne's face, which should have radiated with that special glow of the bride-to-be, was closed and lifeless. Tyler was worried.

In a way it was a relief when the doorbell rang. Alison hurried to answer it, expecting a postman or a delivery boy.

But it was Gregg who stood there, shaking the rain off his hat.

When she had recovered from the brief shock of seeing him so unexpectedly, she beckoned him in and closed the door quietly. "What are you doing here?" she demanded in low tones.

"You asked for my help. Here I am to give it. Your letter made me realize how unthinking and irresponsible I had been."

"I don't think you should have come here tonight, Gregg. Yvonne and Tyler are both at home at the moment."

He grimaced. "That's bad luck. I wanted to have a long talk with you about what's to be done. Shall I go away and come back later?"

"I don't know—"

"What's keeping you, Alison?" called Sylvia from the sitting-room. "If it's the man about tables for the reception—"

As she spoke her voice was coming nearer, and with her last words she stepped into the hall. Her face lit up at sight of Gregg.

"Well, you are a stranger!" she cried. "Where have you been all this while?"

Alison made a move enjoining silence, but Sylvia didn't even notice. She turned back into the sitting-room to beckon to the others. "Look who's here!" she invited. "Yvonne, now we'll be able to ask him to the wedding!"

In immediate response her niece came to the sitting-room door. Her amazed glance took in the group—Sylvia eagerly urging Gregg to move forward, Alison trying to quieten her mother. And Gregg standing with anxious eyes taking in what he saw.

In one radiant flash, the glow of the bride-to-be came into her face. She darted across the hall and flung herself into Gregg's arms.

"Oh, my darling, my darling!" she sobbed. "Why did you go away and leave me? Never leave me again!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

EXACTLY what happened next Alison couldn't have described to anyone afterwards. There was a hubbub of voices. The next thing on which she clear was that Gregg had asked her to bring a glass of brandy for Yvonne, who was huddled on the sofa in the sitting-room with her face hidden against Gregg's shoulder. Alison herself remembered pouring out the brandy and bringing it across the room, past her parents standing looking on with shocked, hushed faces, past Tyler standing with his head averted.

Gregg took the brandy glass and tried to coax Yvonne into raising her head and taking a sip. "Come along now, Yvonne, just a sip. It'll do you good. Now be a good girl." His voice was gently reassuring, as if he were speaking to a young child. The hand he used to tilt her chin upwards was kind and firm. He was in full command of the situation now. He glanced up at Alison. "How long did you say she's been like this?"

"Ever since you went away, but not so bad as this—it's been developing slowly."

"But I don't understand," said Alison's mother tremulously. "What's been going on?"

"Nothing that we can go into just at the moment, Mrs. Blake-lock," he said to her over his shoulder. He eased Yvonne to a reclining position against the sofa cushions. "Better?" he asked cheerfully.

She nodded. Her hand came out to clutch at his sleeve as he rose from his knees. "Don't leave me!" she begged.

"Of course not."

"Promise you'll never leave me again!"

"I promise." He unclasped her clutching fingers from his sleeve and instead took her hand in his. Yvonne leaned her head against his wrist, trusting in this confident figure who now stood

tall and resolute at her side, waiting for the barrage of questions he knew must come.

Tyler took a deep breath. "When she saw you she—she—" He could not bring himself to describe that meeting, the death-blow to all his own dreams. He began again. "It seems she never loved me at all . . ."

"I'm sorry," Gregg said simply.

"But she pretended to me that she did! Why did she do that? Good God, in a week's time we'd have been man and wife, yet all the time she felt like this about you!"

"We had a misunderstanding. I went away. I blame myself for that. I should have stayed on the scene and prevented her from driving herself to a crack-up like this."

"But you can't just explain it away like that!" Tyler protested in growing anger. "She always talked of you as being practically engaged to—to—well, she gave me impression that you belonged to someone else and that you meant nothing to her. And she told me she loved me—she assured me again and again that it was me she wanted to marry. Only this very day, I asked her if she was sure—and she said she was—she said I was the only one she—she—" All at once he broke off and turned away, finding a chair and sinking on it with his head in his hands. "Oh, God," he moaned, "it was a lie from start to finish, nothing but a lie . . ."

Gregg's eyes sought Alison's. He nodded towards the bowed figure. "I think you're best qualified to help him."

Without stopping to inquire why he should think so, she went swiftly to Tyler and stooped over him. "I don't think this is the time or the place for a long explanation, Tyler. It can only add to your misery."

Without looking up, he nodded. "I don't want to ask any more," he mumbled.

She knew he was very near to breaking point, and stood between him and the other people in the room, her body a shield. No one spoke for a moment.

Then Sylvia thought of something and had to put it into words.

"The wedding . . . ?" she faltered. "I suppose it will have to be cancelled now!"

Alison wheeled on her, her face white with anger. But it was too late, the damage was done.

Tyler stumbled to his feet and made for the door. "If I never see any of you again," he said harshly, "I may be able to crawl through the rest of my life without dying of shame!"

In the moments of stricken silence that followed his departure they could hear the front door slam and his car race out of the square.

"Poor devil," muttered Gregg.

"But I only said—But the wedding *will* have to be cancelled," Sylvia insisted tearfully. "We couldn't go on with it now."

"By heaven we couldn't!" her husband announced in tones of remorse and indignation. "How things have got as far as they have, *knowing* she loved someone else so much—! Yvonne, you ought to be ashamed!"

"Now go easy, Mr. Blakelock—" Gregg began.

"Go easy? That's been the trouble, I've been far too easy. Time and again in these last few weeks I've asked that child why she's been so moody and I've offered to speak to Tyler myself and get the wedding postponed or cancelled. But time and again—not once, mind you, but time and again!—she assured me she cared for Tyler with all her heart. She's been acting a lie, that's what she's been doing—acting a lie! And I'm ashamed of her!"

"You have a perfect right to be angry, Mr. Blakelock, but this isn't the moment—"

"What worries me is the reason behind it. Yvonne, you must have had a very powerful reason for going on with this terrible act of deceit. What was behind it?"

"I can explain everything, Uncle Eric! Don't be angry with me. I've been so unhappy!"

"Then I don't know who's to blame except yourself! Didn't I try to help you? If you had confided in me instead of in Alison—"

"I didn't confide in Alison—"

"Then how does it come about that Alison isn't a bit surprised

at what's happened? She knew you were in love with Gregg, it appears—"

"It would have been better if Alison had kept out of my affairs from start to finish," Yvonne said with a sudden spark of animosity.

"Don't take that tone, girl, and don't talk nonsense! It seems to me Alison's responsible for Gregg's arrival here tonight, and though I don't pretend to know the whole story I do know it's a good thing he came. For if he hadn't, you'd still be going on with that awful farce of a marriage!"

"Be careful, Dad," Alison put in in alarm. "It's no good getting in a rage with her. Let's just be thankful that the disaster has been avoided after all."

"But by no act of hers!" Eric protested violently. "It's all right to say let it pass. But look at it from my point of view. I took this girl into my own house, loved and trusted her as if she were a sister to you, gave in to all her wishes. Yet what happens? She utterly deceives me and what's more, involves me in helping to deceive Tyler, a man I like and respect very much. I call it nothing short of underhanded, and I want an explanation and an apology!"

His niece sprang to her feet, casting away her hold on Gregg's hand. "Apology?" she cried. "What do you mean, apology? I have nothing to apologize for to *you*. You hardly come into it."

"Let me remind you this is my house," her uncle replied hotly. "For the disgraceful fraud you've carried out under my roof you certainly owe me an apology!"

"Under your roof! Oh, that's rich!" Yvonne laughed rather wildly. "Master of the house—and what a barn it was when first I arrived! Who made it what it is now? Who brought you into the circle of important people? And yet you have the ingratitude to ask me for an apology?"

Her aunt put a trembling hand up to her mouth. "Darling, don't talk like that," she pleaded breathlessly. "It's not like you at all."

"She's right, Yvonne," Gregg put in with cool firmness.

"You're working yourself up into near-hysterics." He glanced at Eric. "You'll have to forgive her for now sir. She's not quite responsible for what she's saying. Alison said in her letter to me that Yvonne was heading for a break-down but I'd no idea how close to it she had come."

"Alison wrote to you!" Yvonne echoed sharply. "Alison! I might have known she came into it somewhere. If she hadn't interfered between us in the first place, Gregg, none of this need ever have happened!"

"Don't try to put the blame on Alison—"

"No, by heaven, don't try it!" thundered Eric with a sternness that, in him, was unheard-of. "If you think you can get out of this by blaming my daughter, you're vastly mistaken. Alison seems to have acted with a good deal of sense and honesty. I wish I could say the same for you."

"Are you calling me dishonest!" Yvonne cried.

"I certainly am. And let me tell you this—if you're to go on living in this house I shall expect a full explanation of your behaviour, an apology for all the trouble you've caused, and a promise to behave better—"

"How dare you! How dare you speak to me like that! What do you think I am, a spineless rag doll? Ah, no—you go too far! I won't stay a moment longer in a house where I am treated like that!"

"Now don't talk nonsense, Yvonne—"

"It is not nonsense! I won't stay here to be ordered about like a schoolgirl! By an uncle I never saw until six months ago, a man who knows nothing about me, a nobody! Why should I stay and listen to you? I'm going—going this minute!"

"But you can't just walk out like that, Yvonne," Sylvia protested in anguish. "Where would you go? How would you live? Eric, don't let her!"

Her husband nodded unwillingly. "What your aunt says is quite true, Yvonne. You're only nineteen after all. We're responsible for you."

"I can't stay here!" she cried desperately. "I can't, I won't!"

I can't live with people who want to belittle me all the time! Gregg, take me away! If you love me, take me away from this dreadful place!"

Sobbing, she threw herself against him. He put his arms round her protectively and held her close. Over her head he looked at Eric Blakelock. "I think it would be best if she left," he ventured. "It would be painfully embarrassing for you all if she stayed. Besides, I don't think you know how to handle her."

"But, Gregg, we have a responsibility—"

"So have I. It's my fault things have reached this disastrous stage. If you feel you could trust me, I'd undertake to see she came to no harm."

"You? But that's hardly suitable, my boy—"

He smiled with a wry irony. "I think we've got past the stage of worrying about the conventions, haven't we? But to set your mind at rest, I can promise that she'll be living with a friend of mine, a woman doctor who's a colleague of mine at Bradlow New Town. She's a middle-aged woman with a comfortable flat close to the hospital."

"Gregg—" Alison broke out.

"Yes?"

"Think what you're doing, Gregg."

At her appeal he bent his head a moment, then looked up. "I know what I'm doing, Alison. And I know why I'm doing it. I've discovered you can't run away for ever. You get out of breath and have to stop."

"I understand what you mean. But after what's happened, how can there be any trust or confidence, any happiness—"

Yvonne stepped forward to stand between Gregg and Alison. "I can make him happy!" she said.

"Yvonne dear," quavered Sylvia, "we'll take you back. We'll forgive you. Don't go."

"Forgive me? I don't want your forgiveness. I don't want anything from anyone except Gregg." She turned to him, tilting her head back and staring up at him. "We'll be happy, won't we, Gregg? In spite of them all, we'll be happy. We'll get married as

you always wanted and we'll build a happy world of our own where other people can't interfere."

"We'll do whatever you want," he promised gently, and led her out with his arm about her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

WHEN they had gone Sylvia crumpled into the nearest chair and began to sob as if her heart would break. For the moment Alison could do nothing for her. All her strength was needed for her own battle—the battle for her own self-control. She wanted to cry out against the cruelty of Fate, the irreversible tragedy she had seen begun tonight. Gregg had taken over the responsibility for Yvonne's future. He himself must know how difficult it would be to build any sort of life together out of the ruined fragments strewn around Yvonne's careless feet. Yet he had done it willingly, had accepted the task without a moment's hesitation.

Alison felt torn in two by grief and a sense of intolerable loss. And it was she herself who had brought it about. She had written to Gregg, asking for help and advice. She should have known he would come himself. She was a fool, and by her folly she had condemned Gregg to a future that could lead nowhere but to misery.

Her father was bending over her weeping mother, but could do nothing to comfort her. He glanced back at Alison. "Aren't you going to help me?" he pleaded.

Yes, then and in the days to come, she was going to help him. Since she was in part responsible for the mess, it was up to her to help clear it up.

There was no difficulty about obtaining a few days' leave from the hospital. She still had her summer holidays due to her, because having given her savings to her father she had no money to go away. She asked and was granted immediate leave of absence, and at once set about the most urgent task—the cancelling of the wedding arrangements and the sending back of the presents.

It was a grim business. At first she had her mother's help, but Sylvia's distress mounted with every letter she wrote until in the

end she was so blinded by tears that her writing became illegible. The alternative chore—repacking the presents—was soon quite beyond her. When Alison found her sitting in the dining-room with her head in her hands, she decided things had gone far enough, and put her to bed.

The family doctor was an old friend. When he saw Sylvia he was a worried man. "What's been going on?" he demanded. "How did she get in that state? She's nearly exhausted physically—it looks as if she's been burning the candle at both ends for months. On top of that there's this terrific depression."

Between them father and daughter produced a fumbling excuse about family troubles and financial worries. Dr. Powell frowned and shrugged and sat down to write a prescription.

"Get this made up as soon as you can and start her on it immediately. That anaemia of hers has got to be checked. I'm surprised at you, Alison. I always relied on you to keep an eye on your mother."

"It's not Alison's fault," Eric broke in, leaping to her defence. "If anyone's to blame, it's myself."

"Well, it's no use fretting about the past, I suppose. We've got to plan for the future. She's not to undertake any heavy work—no polishing or scrubbing, no hours at the ironing board. I'd order her to be kept in bed only I know that's difficult for you. Can you get someone in to give an eye to the place?"

Eric looked at Alison. She nodded. "I can change over from living-in at the hospital to living-out. If we can get someone just to come in during the day, to do an hour or two's house-work . . ."

By the end of her leave she had completed the dispatch of the mass of presents and the letters of apology. She sat back, prepared to sigh with relief and enjoy the improvement. But her father had only been waiting for this moment to ask for urgent advice on the business.

"It's the old press, you see, Alison. I should have replaced it this year, only you know I let the money be used for other things. Now the poor old thing is really on its last legs, and it's seriously

reducing our output. Now that you're doing the housekeeping, will you see to it that household expenses are cut right down to the bone? We've still got outstanding accounts to clear up that Yvonne left behind, and what with one thing and another, we'll only just get by if we economise all we can."

She promised to do all she could to help. At the end of that day she was glad of an excuse to escape from the house and go out, even if it was only to Crownham District Hospital to collect her things, especially the uniform she would need next day. She rather dreaded questions from her friends, who would have seen the announcement about the cancelled wedding, heard of Alison's request for leave "to settle family affairs", and put two and two together. But on the whole they were tactful and sympathetic. Cookie took her aside as she was leaving to add, "I didn't like to say it in front of the others, but that fellow who was to have married your cousin has rung the nurses' home twice asking for you."

"Asking for *me*?"

"Yes. The first time it was a new housemaid who didn't know you were on leave and said she thought you must have left. The second time I happened to take the call myself, so I told him you were at home on leave. Did he ring you?"

"No, he didn't."

"No, I didn't think he would. He didn't seem to fancy my suggestion that he should contact you at home. But he sounded as if he wanted to talk to you."

She thanked Cookie for the information and took her suitcase out to the old family station wagon. Ought she to ring Tyler? She debated for a while, and decided that she ought. He had had enough ill-treatment at the hands of the Blakelocks. If he wanted to contact her, the least she could do was reciprocate. So she went to a call-box on the corner and rang him from there.

She was careful to announce herself as "*Alison* Blakelock." Immediately he broke in with, "Oh, how kind of you to ring."

"They told me at the hospital you'd wanted to speak to me."

"Yes, I just wanted to ask one or two things . . . But I didn't want to ring you at home."

"No, I quite understand. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to—Well, it isn't a thing we can discuss over the phone." He cleared his throat. "Could we meet some time?"

"It's rather difficult for me, Tyler. Mother isn't well so I'm moving back home—and you don't want to come to the house. The rest of the time I'm likely to be on duty at the hospital."

"Yes, that is difficult. When does your leave end?"

"I go on duty tomorrow. But as a matter of fact I'm free at the moment, Tyler, if you are?"

"Why yes, I'm doing nothing except sit about at home. Could I take you out somewhere? A restaurant?"

She glanced down at her old sweater and skirt. "I'm not exactly dressed for anything like that, Tyler. Would it be all right if I just drove round to your flat? I've got a car, I could be there in ten minutes."

"So long as you don't mind—?"

She assured him she didn't, and drove there straight away. She had dined there once with her parents and Yvonne and had met Tyler's formidable manservant Folkson, who now opened the door to her in frowning disapproval at her old clothes.

Tyler hurried out of his study at the sound of her arrival. "This is kind of you," he said, holding out his hand. "I simply can't tell you how much I've wanted to speak to you. Come in, sit down. My dear girl, you look tired."

"I am, a bit," she admitted, sinking into one of the enormous red leather armchairs. "I needn't tell you how awful things have been at home. How have you been, Tyler?"

He shrugged. "Let's not bother with that. Did you say your mother was ill?"

"She's not too good. It's this terrible business . . . Now Yvonne's gone, her life seems to have come to pieces."

"I know just how she feels," Tyler murmured. He paused and then added, "I got the ring back."

She nodded in understanding, and he took out an envelope

from a desk drawer and tossed it to her. It was a registered envelope such as can be bought in a post office. Inside, in a thick fold of blotting paper, was the sapphire ring. There was nothing else, no note, no card. The postmark was W.2., the date the day Yvonne had left the Blakelocks' house.

"You mean she didn't write?" Alison cried in horror.

"Not a line. I'm not complaining about it—that's not why I wanted to talk to you. It's just that I'm worried. You'll think I'm a fool, but I can't be happy until I know she's all right. How is Yvonne?"

Alison stared, then gave a sudden cry of realization. "Tyler, do forgive me! What must you think of me? I should have rung you, or written! It quite went out of my mind that you don't know how the row ended. You left just as it was beginning."

"There was a row?"

She shivered. "You've never seen my father angry. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, watch out! As a result, Yvonne considered herself insulted, and insisted on leaving."

"Leaving?"

"I see now why you didn't want to ring us at Crownham Square or come to the house. You thought she was still with us. No, she's gone."

"But where did she go?" Tyler cried anxiously. "She knows a few people in London, but she could hardly throw herself on them for long—"

"She went with Gregg. She's to live with a woman friend of his until they can be married."

"I see." He heaved himself out of his chair and went to the window, then back again. "It's unintelligent of me to be upset at hearing that. Naturally I knew beyond all doubt that everything was over between Yvonne and me, yet it's a bit of a stab to hear of her marrying someone else."

"I can understand that. Even when you know the truth about her she still retains some of her magic. At least, so it proved with Gregg."

Tyler shook his head. "I'm hoping to find some means of count-

eracting the spell. I've got a lot of work to do and I'm trying to bury myself in that. All the same she keeps coming back into my mind . . . " He talked on for a while, and recalling he had once said he had no one in whom he could confide, she let him talk. She could see he was striving to take a sensible attitude, but he had been deeply hurt and now and again bitterness laced his words. Once, when he spoke rather slightly of Gregg, she felt bound to protest.

"You musn't blame Gregg in any way. He was as much a victim of the enchantment as you were. And when I appealed to him for help on your behalf, he came at once."

Tyler eyed her curiously. "Forgive me for asking this, but—" "What?"

"Perhaps I've got it all wrong, but I'd always been led to believe that you and Gregg had some sort of understanding. Was there really nothing in that either?"

"I know what you were probably told. Before Yvonne came on the scene I had been out with Gregg—perhaps three or four times in all. I certainly had no claim on him, nor he on me." She was glad she could say this without a tremor of give-away regret in her voice.

"That's better than I'd feared. I thought you'd been as badly let down as myself. That was why I took that tone when I spoke of Gregg. I'm glad it wasn't so, Alison. Somehow I'd hate to think of you being hurt."

They fell into silence for a moment. Alison roused herself, saying, "I must get home. Dad will be wondering what on earth has happened to me."

"I can imagine how much he must depend on you. I had no right to take up your time. Before you go, there's one question I'd like to ask."

"What's that?"

"Could I see you again some time?"

"But of course. Although my time is rather tied up at present."

"Could I ring you, perhaps? We could go out to a show or something."

"I'd love to."

He saw her down to her car. "Good night, my dear," he said quietly. "I don't know how you've managed it, but you've made me feel life's worth living again!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THEREAFTER, without any express intention on the part of either, Alison and Tyler became frequent companions. As time went by she found he was someone in whom she in her turn could confide; he showed interest in the problems of the family business and by his sensible advice—and she also suspected by some help brought in at second—or third-hand—was able to set it on the road to recovery again. Alison was more than grateful to him; she had always liked and respected him even when Yvonne's strong character was overshadowing his. But now that she had a chance to get to know him she found him intelligent, responsive, and generous.

It was only natural that their conversation should sometimes turn to Yvonne. "I simply can't imagine her as the wife of a provincial staff surgeon, Alison. Correct me if I'm wrong, but the salary Gregg earns won't give much scope for her expensive tastes."

She sighed and shook her head. "She may reform, of course. Twice already Fate's given her a warning that she must give up this fairy-tale idea of living a life of luxury. Perhaps she'll take heed and settle down."

"I certainly hope so, for Gregg's sake. He doesn't sound the kind of fellow who'd take kindly to a load of debts."

"He'd hate it. I suppose that in a town like Bradlow there's little to tempt her to extravagance."

"That may only make matters worse," Tyler pointed out. "She may find life dull and start throwing money about in an attempt to liven things up. If there's one thing I'm certain of, it's that Yvonne isn't temperamentally suited to a career of quiet usefulness in the provinces."

"I'm afraid I agree. When I try to picture it, it just won't take shape in my mind. It does seem to me that there is one chance.

If she could feel that she was taking the lead among the women there—if she had a little money to play with, to give parties and show off a bit . . . But on a surgeon's salary, as you say, she'll find life dull."

"It's a poor outlook," he agreed.

"I'll tell you what I've thought of, Tyler. I suppose it's a far-fetched idea, but—well, see what you think."

"Go ahead," he urged.

"You know that French families sometimes give their daughters a dowry when they marry, even nowadays. I was wondering if the French-Canadian grandparents could be persuaded to settle a small sum on Yvonne. It needn't be much—just enough to give her a dress allowance or something like that. What do you think?"

Tyler thought it over for a moment. "I don't know . . . They did make it a condition, didn't they, that her father wasn't to make any claim on them after they'd paid for her education?"

"Yes, quite true. And her father is dead, and never made any claim. Don't you think that, after educating her for a life of leisure, they ought to pay a little towards helping her achieve that kind of life? I'm not saying they *owe* her anything—but on the other hand if someone were to let them know she was settling down to married life on a very limited income, they might feel inclined to do what they did before—act according to the strict family code that says the Brehavre women must be provided for."

He smiled a little. "Touch the family pride? I suppose it might work. But they don't know about her marriage. They haven't taken the slightest interest in her since her mother died."

"No reason why they shouldn't be reminded of her existence is there? I've been thinking about it off and on for quite a while now, but that's the point at which I get stuck. What would be the best way to remind them that they have a grand-daughter called Yvonne Blakelock? Would it be any use writing to them?"

"Great scot, no!" Tyler exclaimed. "They'd cut you dead. These old French clans are too proud to allow outsiders to interfere in family affairs."

Alison furrowed her brow. "I don't know what else to suggest. They're so far off and 'un-get-at-able'."

"One thing's certain. The direct approach is absolutely out." He pondered over it. "I tell you what, though. They're certain to have an agent who looks after their business affairs in England—"

"An agent? Oh, I hardly think—"

"I don't mean just a shipping agent. I mean a man of business—an attorney, an arbitrator—probably some frightfully respectable old chap in a big law firm."

"Oh, I see." Alison grimaced. "I don't think there's much to be done through anyone like that. They wouldn't be interested—"

"You're wrong there. People like that take interest in everything that concerns their clients—especially rich, plushy clients like the Brehavres."

"But how would we set about contacting a firm like that? I wouldn't know where to begin. They might think it an awful check, anyhow."

"So they might, if we just went barging in. But look here, how would it be if I got my own lawyer to make a few tactful inquiries?"

"Wouldn't that put it all on a terribly legal basis? As if we were bringing a lawsuit?"

"Not a bit! Good heavens, these lawyer blokes get together in clubs and gossip like a crowd of magpies. No, what I had in mind was to get Preston to have a chat with the Brehavres' man over a glass of port—mention that a friend of his (meaning me) knows a grand-daughter of the family, and go on from there. Nothing may come of it, of course. But on the other hand, the Brehavres' lawyer may feel it worth mentioning next time he writes, and if the Brehavres show an interest we'll hear more of it."

Alison agreed that it was worth a try and let the matter lie in Tyler's capable hands. Nothing at all happened for a couple of weeks, and then there was a most unexpected reaction. Tyler rang her up at the hospital.

"Alison, are you free this evening?" he inquired.

"It depends what for. I did promise to help Mother write the Christmas cards, but it's not urgent."

"It would be far more rewarding to come and dine with me tonight. Preston is coming."

"Preston? Who's Preston—? Oh, your solicitor! Why, what's happened?"

"I don't quite know. He rang me a while ago. He's got news of the Brehavres, and it seems to be something to do with Yvonne, but he won't say what on the telephone. I invited him here to dinner, and he particularly asked me to invite you too."

"In that case," Allison said with a little thrill of interest, "I'll most certainly come."

Whittaker Preston was a benign white-haired man with thick-lensed glasses. He shook hands warmly with Alison, but stilled her first question with an upraised hand. "No business to be discussed until after dinner," he chided. "I've too great a respect for the wonders that Tyler's manservant can produce."

Tyler exchanged a sympathetic smile with Alison, but could do nothing to alter the old man's determination. Certainly the food was excellent, though a stilted discussion of the proposed Christmas decorations in Regent Street did nothing to enhance its attractions. But when the coffee was eventually served in the drawing-room, and the manservant had gone, Preston relented.

"And so my dear enterprising young lady, you thought that the Brehavres of Montreal might wish to be reminded that they had a grand-daughter in Europe. What exactly made you think so?"

Allison was surprised at the question. "Didn't Tyler explain? It was only that I thought they'd wish to hear of her marriage. It's a thing I would want to know about if I had a grand-daughter!"

"But then you're not so strait-laced as the Brehavres. When a man like old Lucien Brehavre said he disowned his daughter and didn't want to be reminded of her or her child, he meant it."

"Oh." She looked her disappointment. "And I thought he might have changed his mind a tiny bit."

"Not he. He spent his life being angry with his only daughter

for marrying against his wishes and died without so much as mentioning her in his will."

"He sounds dreadful. Of course I'm sorry he's dead," she added hastily, "but I don't think I'd have liked him if we'd ever met."

"Few people did. Besides his daughter he had two sons, and he managed to quarrel with both of them at some time or other. He didn't cut them off, but he did make family life difficult. Since his death earlier this year old Madame Brchavre has been attempting to reunite the scattered family, like a true French matriarch. She's a good deal less hard-hearted than old Lucien, and although she likes her own way she's less cold-blooded about what she wants."

"Reunite the scattered family?" Tyler repeated.

"You mean she might actually be quite pleased to hear news of Yvonne?" added Alison.

Preston smiled sleekly. "More than that—much more. Madame Brchavre, so I'm told, went looking for Yvonne this summer, and only gave up when she heard the girl had left Marseilles."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"GAVE UP?" Alison cried. "Why didn't she follow to London? Why give up when she was so near?"

Mr. Preston took his glasses off and began to polish them on a snowy handkerchief. "Ah well, to understand that you have to understand Grand'mère Brehavre. She pictured herself as a sort of fat good fairy swooping down on the dock area of Marseilles to rescue her poor little Cinderella of a grand-daughter. Little bits of news had come her way about the child from time to time, I dare say—how the child was getting on at school, whether the father was using the money strictly for school fees, and so on. The father, as she doubtless knew, was now dead. She pictured young Yvonne as scraping a living by teaching or working in a shop—both worthy occupations but not fit for a Brehavre. She, the great Émilie Brehavre, would snatch her grand-daughter out of that dismal life and make her happy. But she found Yvonne didn't need her."

"Didn't need her! Yvonne would have been delighted to be snatched up by Grand'mère Brehavre!"

"Not the way Madame Brehavre heard it, I imagine. She was told by Yvonne's former neighbours that she had gone to live with rich, influential relatives in London."

"Oh, not really!"

"She was indeed. And so annoyed and disappointed was Madame Brehavre that she dropped her search and flew back to Canada."

"But that's a shame! It was all a silly mistake. The relatives she went to weren't rich and influential, it was only *us*. And we're just ordinary."

"But Madame Brehavre didn't know that."

"What would be her reaction if she knew?" Tyler inquired with curiosity.

"Ah, that I can't say. She went in search of a young, unmarried grand-daughter whom she would have made a fuss of and perhaps married off to some suitable young French-Canadian. What she'd say to a grand-daughter already married I've no idea. Wolmott—that's her lawyer—Wolmott says she might be quite pleased, but he'd have to sound her out first."

"Is he going to do that?" Alison asked.

"We—ell, that depends. You understand that Émilie Brehavre is an imperious, self-opinionated old lady, and if she were brought into contact with Yvonne it would have to be on *her* terms. She'd expect Yvonne to be respectful and obedient, as a dutiful young grand-daughter should. The husband would have to stay in the background as much as possible until Grand'mère decided whether she liked him. She'd expect him to be almost as respectful as Yvonne, and certainly she wouldn't want any arguments from him."

Alison looked doubtful. "That doesn't sound good."

"A lot depends on the man. Tyler tells me he's a doctor."

"A surgeon," she corrected. "A very good one."

"But not rich."

"No, not a bit."

"If he has common sense and a bit of self-control, he can *be* rich—at least, comparatively so. The girl is very pretty, I hear."

"Exceptionally. In fact, she's more than pretty, she's enchanting."

Preston raised thick white eyebrows. "Praise indeed, from one young woman to another. If she's really attractive Madame Brehavre is likely to be very taken with her. She loves pretty things."

"Yvonne has inherited that characteristic," Alison remarked rather drily. "She loves pretty and expensive things."

The lawyer coughed politely. "What I mean is, the old lady may do something really handsome for the girl. But only if she's allowed to handle things her own way. If there's likely to be the least disagreement from either of the young people it would be better not to bring them into contact at all."

"But how can anyone tell how they'd react, until the actual meeting takes place?" argued Tyler, his long face alight with interest in the problem. "It's impossible to know."

"Not quite impossible. The two of you know the young couple. You ought to be able to assess their feelings."

Alison was sure of one thing at least. "I'm sure Yvonne would behave with perfect propriety towards her grandmother. In fact I think they'd get on marvellously."

"But the husband?" countered Preston.

"That's more difficult." She shook her head over it. "I don't know—it would depend how Madame Brehavre treated him. Gregg's manners are naturally good and he gets on well with most people, but he won't stand for being ordered about."

"Not even if it means his wife might come into a bit of money or something like that?"

"Not even then, Mr. Preston. He values his self-respect."

He pursed his lips. "It's like this. Wolmott just isn't prepared to move a step unless he knows the whole thing will go smoothly. The old lady will only vent her rage on him if he starts something that doesn't run according to plan. In fact, Wolmott simply refuses to be aware of the young couple's existence until he gets an assurance they'll behave properly if Grand'mère decided to pay them a visit."

"But how can he be assured of that?"

"It could be managed. A friend who knew the young couple, who had their interests at heart, and had some influence with the husband—if such a person were to go and see them, and explain matters to them?"

"But who? Who could undertake such a task? I don't think my father would be very willing. Or did you mean Tyler?" She glanced at Tyler, who shook his head decisively. She understood that the last thing Tyler would want was an interview with Yvonne and the man she had now married.

When she turned back to question the lawyer, she found he was examining her with quiet appraisal.

"You yourself strike me as the ideal person, my dear."

"Oh no—I'm not suitable—"

"But you are. You probably know your own cousin at least as well as anyone in this country. And the young man was a former colleague of yours, as I understand it."

"But I couldn't possibly do it. I don't want to."

"Don't you think they have a right to know that Yvonne can be something of an heiress, if she plays her cards right?"

"I suppose so," she agreed unwillingly.

"Then you'll go?"

"If you really think . . . When ought I to go?"

As soon as possible, they told her. So two days later Alison was on her way north to Bradlow. Her heart beat to the rapid rhythm of the train wheels—"I shall see Gregg again, I shall see Gregg again!" She tried to counteract the mounting excitement she felt by remembering that he was now a married man, that if he had once been slightly more than a friend to her that was a thing of the past, over for ever. Yet her heart sang, and she was happy.

She had written a note to Gregg to let him know she was coming. It had cost her some trouble to write. She didn't know whether to say that the matter that brought her was important and thereby raise some sort of expectation, or whether to say it was a friendly visit. Had she been writing to Yvonne it might actually have been easier. But she didn't have their new address and had to write to Gregg care-of the hospital. So in the end she simply said she was coming on a matter of business, and left it at that.

To her inexpressible delight the first thing she saw as the train drew in at the brand-new station was Gregg himself, stamping his feet to keep warm in the bitter east wind. She had to sit back in her corner seat again, to compose her features into a less give-away expression, before opening the compartment door. But when she sat forward again, Gregg himself was opening the door and asking for her suitcase. He had already seen her at the window.

"It's marvellous to see you, Alison! How are you? You look just the same—oh, goodness, what a mad thing to say—after only a couple of months, of course you do! But it seems like years!"

If to him she looked the same, to her he looked different. There were lines in his face that had never been there before, and an edginess in his glance. Even his voice was different—less easy-going, less unhurried that it used to be.

He assured her that he was very well indeed, however, and went on to talk with something of the old zest about his new job. The hospital was first-rate, the operating theatre was a dream of perfect equipment, most of his colleagues were likeable.

"And how is Yvonne?" she asked when in politeness the question could no longer be delayed.

It seemed to her that some of the cheerfulness died from his face. "At present she's quite well. When we first got here she was a bit under the weather as I dare say you'll remember. But now that Christmas festivities have started to come along she's become more like herself—in fact she's quite gay." He hesitated and added, "I told her of your visit, naturally, and tried to get her to discuss what this 'matter of business' might be. She says she can't imagine but I rather get the impression she'd left a great many unpaid bills behind her. Is it about that?"

"Oh no, of course not!" She stopped short, staring up at him. "You didn't really think I'd travel a hundred and twenty miles just to nag Yvonne about unpaid bills?"

He handed her into his car and strapped her case on the luggage rack at the back. "Well," he said between tugs on the strap, "you'd be—perfectly within your rights—if you did." He got in beside her, but before starting the car sat motionless for a moment. "She did leave a pile of debts, then? I rather thought so."

"Gregg, please don't worry about it. Dad's clearing them off gradually. And honestly I didn't come to talk about that."

"Then what did you come to talk about?"

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you before I tell Yvonne. It concerns her more than it does you. But after all as her husband your interest is almost as great as hers—"

Gregg had put the car in motion, but now he put on the brake so suddenly that they jolted forward in their seats. He shot an

arm round her to prevent her from knocking herself against the windscreen.

"Sorry," he said quickly. "Are you all right? I shouldn't have done that—it was a silly trick—but you took me by surprise."

"I'm all right." But she was startled and puzzled. "What do you mean, I took you by surprise? I haven't said anything about the news so far."

"You said that as Yvonne's husband I had an equal interest in the news."

"So you have. She's your wife—anything that concerns her must—"

"But my dear girl, surely you don't think I'd let the wedding take place without at least letting your father know? Common decency would insist on that much."

"Gregg, you don't mean—?"

He put his hand in his breast pocket and took out a folded paper. "The wedding licence," he said. "Still unused."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

AT his words Alison's heart gave a lunge of wild, illogical hope. In the space of a second, thousands of half-formed possibilities whirled into her mind like meteorites. But immediate second thoughts quenched all that glorious optimism; the whole thing was easily accounted for. By Gregg's own admission Yvonne had been unwell. What could be more natural than postponing the wedding?

All the same it altered matters in more ways than one. There was a subtle difference now in the relationship between herself and the man who sat alongside her in the sports car. A moment ago he had been, in her mind, Yvonne's husband; a man she would never cease to love but whom she had regarded as cut off from her once and for all by his marriage. Now he was Gregg Danton, a man who still belonged only to himself, a free man.

A free man? When he loved Yvonne with a devotion that couldn't be changed even by the knowledge that she had lied and cheated?

She became aware that the silence between them was lengthening into an awkwardness. Hurriedly she rushed into speech. "I'm afraid I took it for granted that you and Yvonne would get married at once. I thought that was what you intended—I mean from the way you spoke that evening—and Yvonne too—I thought—"

"So did I," he agreed. He spread the licence to be married on the steering wheel and tapped the date with his forefinger. "I applied for this the morning after we got back to Bradlow. We drove down the previous night, only stopping to post off Yvonne's engagement ring to Tyler. By the way, did she write to him at the same time? I didn't like to interfere too much, but it struck me she was in and out of that post office in two minutes."

"No, she didn't write."

He bit his lip. "I *am* sorry. But you understand she was in no fit state to be argued with. When we reached Bradlow I got Phyllis Michael to take Yvonne in straight away. The next day I applied for the marriage licence, as I said, and I thought we'd be married as soon as it was granted, but somehow . . . it hasn't worked out that way."

"Because of her health?"

"Not her physical health." He sighed deeply. "It's more to do with her state of mind. You understand that she went through a terrible psychological upheaval those weeks between the day she got engaged to Tyler and the day she broke it off. The crisis arrived when I walked in. She couldn't go on with her pretence. Well, she can't make up her mind whether she hates me for ruining her lovely plans or adores me so much that she considers the world well lost for me."

"Gregg, that's awful!" said Alison in dismay.

"For Yvonne, it certainly is. She's living in a sort of psychological nightmare. Some days she can't bear to let me out of her sight, other days I'm the bane of her life."

"It can't be much fun for you either."

"Me—oh, well, I asked for it, didn't I? If I hadn't been prepared to shoulder the responsibility I shouldn't have come back into her life."

"You couldn't have known she'd be caught in this vicious circle of her own emotions."

"Listen, Alison, when I came to your home that night I knew I wasn't embarking on a joy ride. I'm not complaining at the way things have turned out. I hope I don't give that impression."

"Of course not," she said swiftly. "I didn't mean that. Only it does seem a tremendous problem to have to cope with on your own."

"It has its compensations. When Yvonne is in one of her happy moods she can be awfully sweet, you know, Alison. And then the fact that she does really need me . . . I suppose it's one of the human failings to want to be needed." He nodded to himself.

"And then on the larger view—I couldn't have lived with myself if I'd let her marry Tyler."

"I understand," she agreed in low tones.

He shot her a strange glance. "I don't for a moment think you do, and perhaps it's just as well. But one of the important things was to prevent Yvonne's marriage to Tyler. That would have been a catastrophe. It would have ruined more than one life. And though you may find this hard to believe, knowing what you do about me, I *have* a conscience. I couldn't just stand by and see Tyler embark on his own destruction, because I have a regard for him and—and—a regard for those who care about him."

Alison was considering his remark that she would think it strange he had a conscience. "You're very hard on yourself, Gregg," she protested. "Just because you weren't sure at one time that you had the strength to say no to Yvonne's plans . . . None of us are such towers of strength that we can resist *every* temptation."

"I'm glad you're able to find an excuse for me," he replied sadly. "I can find none for myself. I should have stayed there and argued and shouted and generally made such a fuss that Tyler was bound to hear of it and the engagement would have been broken off before it ever got going. I was a fool and a weakling—"

"No, that's not true. When you're in love, the mind is so easily bewildered and hurt . . ."

Her words seemed to strike deeply at him. He turned his head and sat studying her, his eyes sombre and yet full of kindness. As if following his own train of thought he said after a moment, "And how is Tyler? You and he have been seeing each other at least occasionally, I hope."

"As a matter of fact, it's partly due to Tyler that I'm here today."

"Due to Tyler?" That really surprised him. "Yet you said it was a matter of business."

"He and I between us. We thought we might be able to do something helpful."

Gregg turned away suddenly and frowned at his steering-

wheel. "I don't know what you mean by helpful," he said in a tone of withdrawal. "If you mean financially, let's just drop the whole thing here and now, shall we?"

"Oh now, Gregg—as if we *would!*"

He looked up again. Then he smiled. "No, of course not. Sorry. I know I'm getting touchy about money. It comes of not having enough of it. In families where they have a mink coat in every wardrobe and two cars in every garage I bet they never quarrel over anything so sordid."

Alison eyed him warily. "Can I ask—don't be offended, Gregg—are you and Yvonne having money troubles?"

"How could we avoid it? Don't let's talk about it, Alison. I've looked forward so much to seeing you, don't let's spoil it by going into the profit-and-loss aspect of things. Let's just say that one of the problems is Yvonne's desire to live a champagne life on a shandy income."

"But I think I may be bringing you the solution, Gregg! If Yvonne's grandmother turns up trumps—"

"Who? Yvonne's grandmother? Where does she come into it?"

"Nowhere, yet. But if you and Yvonne want to be put in touch with her, it can be arranged."

"By you?"

"Well, *through* me. That's why I'm here—to find out how you feel about it. You see, Madame Brchavre might take Yvonne back into the family fold if you want it that way. But you'd have to agree to her way of doing things. From your point of view, Gregg, there might be drawbacks. You see she—"

"I don't want to hear about it," he said sharply.

"But, Gregg—"

"It's nothing to do with me. It's a family matter between Yvonne and her grandmother. To drag me into it only confuses the issue."

"But you're concerned in it, Gregg, after all."

"Only after Yvonne has heard the whole story and made her decision."

"Surely, she'll want you to hear it all too, and give your opinion?"

"Alison, I'm the last person who ought to give advice. At present Yvonne isn't sure from one day to the next whether she hates me or loves me. Whichever way she was feeling when she listened to my advice, she'd blame me afterwards for influencing her. I think she ought to be left to decide about a family matter entirely on her own."

Alison tried to argue with him, but he was determined. He resolutely refused to hear any details about old Madame Brehavre and her outlook on life. She was still arguing when he said shortly, "We'd better get to Phyllis Michael's flat instead of sitting here getting frozen in this confounded wind. Yvonne's waiting there. She's probably wondering what on earth's happened to us."

Without more ado he restarted the car and they sped along the road from the station to the town centre. In its way it was an attractive place. Everything was up-to-date as this morning's news bulletin, and though there was a lack of linkage with the past there was as compensation a freshness, an excitement, in the brisk flow of life through the well-planned streets gay with Christmas decorations. They passed the hospital, a fine new building in charmingly landscaped grounds. "My room," Gregg said, pointing to a window on the top floor. "A long walk up when the lifts break down!"

They slowed at a block not far from the hospital. "Dr. Michael's flat's on the second floor," Gregg informed her as he helped her out.

She glanced up automatically. At a window on the second floor the venetian blind was just falling back into place.

There was rather a lengthy wait after Gregg had rung the bell. Then the door swung open to reveal Yvonne in a pretty frilly apron and carrying oven gloves. "So there you are!" she cried. "I've just been in the kitchen making sure the meal isn't drying up."

Gregg apologized for their lateness as he showed Alison in. "We got talking," he said vaguely.

"About me, I suppose? I hope you told her how good and obedient I am, Gregg." She turned gaily to Alison. "He's a dreadful tyrant, you know," she said in a tone of deeply affectionate teasing. "Phyllis says she doesn't know why I put up with it. But Gregg knows—don't you darling."

"Is Dr. Michael here?"

"No, she's at the hospital at the moment. She's a darling—isn't she, Gregg?"

"Not to me, she isn't," he disagreed, laughing. "She used to be a friend of mine but now she always takes Yvonne's side in all the arguments. I'm constantly outvoted two to one."

They went to a tiny sitting-room where a table in an alcove was tastefully laid for lunch. "I'll just get the food out of the oven," Yvonne said, smoothing her pretty apron. "It's all ready."

"Can I help?"

"If you would, Alison. It's such a nuisance that Phyllis's daily had to take her little boy to have his eyes tested today."

As she spoke she led the way into a thimble-sized kitchen where savoury smells were coming from the oven. "It's a sort of casserole," she explained. "Mrs. Bignall made it yesterday, actually, but I've been looking after the cooking of it."

"I'd no idea you could be so domesticated," Alison commented lightly as she picked up a tray from the kitchen table.

Yvonne straightened from in front of the oven. "Surprised, aren't you? And disappointed. You came hoping to find everything in a mess, hoping to 'rescue' Gregg as you 'rescued' Tyler. Well, it won't work."

At the jealousy and resentment in her tone Alison's skin prickled. "That's not why I came—"

"If it was to make trouble about the bills I owe—"

Gregg appeared in the doorway. "Need a strong man to carry the tray?" he inquired cheerfully. Alison was convinced he had timed his arrival so as to cut short any outburst from Yvonne.

She was depressed at this sidelight on the sort of life he was leading, and wondered whether the news she brought would make matters worse or better.

They went back to the dining alcove. As they sat down Yvonne said, with the proper degree of good-natured interest, "What was this matter of business you came about, then, Alison?"

Before Alison could reply Gregg cut in. "I'm sure you'll think it good news, Yvonne. But I've asked Alison not to go any further with it until I've gone to the hospital this afternoon. I want you to decide this thing entirely on your own."

"Good news? What about? How does it happen that you're the one to bring it?"

"You'll hear all about it in half an hour, Yvonne. Now come on—serve the food while it's hot. I've got to be in Out-patients by two-thirty."

"I told you he was a tyrant," Yvonne said, obeying his command. Throughout the meal she kept up a polite conversation about the hotel where Alison proposed to spend the night, but her eyes were bright with speculation.

Gregg rose hurriedly after only a mouthful of his coffee. "I've got to rush. How about us all having dinner together this evening at the hotel? Would that suit you, Alison? Then I can hear what Yvonne has decided."

"And I can wear my new dress," Yvonne put in. "Goodbye, darling." She held her face up for his hasty kiss and then, as soon as he had gone, turned eagerly to Alison. "Well? What's it all about?"

"We've heard that your French-Canadian grandmother flew over from Montreal this summer to look for you in Marseilles, Yvonne."

"Grand'mère Brehavre?" Yvonne's face lit up. "Looking for me?"

"She gave up when she heard you'd gone to live in London—"

"You mean she doesn't want to find me now?"

"From what I hear, she would be glad to find you so long as you turned out to be the sort of grand-daughter she could approve of."

"Why shouldn't she approve of me?" Yvonne said fiercely. "What have you been telling her about me?"

Alison smiled. "She doesn't even know of my existence, so how could I have told her anything? And so far as you are concerned, the last she heard of you was that you had gone to live with your wealthy London relatives." She gave Yvonne a quick sketch of how matters stood, omitting any mention of her own or Tyler's part in the business.

"So if I'm prepared to behave like a dutiful grand-daughter, she'll more than likely receive me back into the family?" Yvonne cried, glowing with delight.

"So Wolmott seems to think."

"But that's wonderful! It's absolutely marvellous! You realize she's probably one of the richest women in Canada? The business would have been left to the sons, of course—there are two of them, Uncle Georges and Uncle Michel—but Grand-père's private property would all go to Grand'mère. Good heavens, I bet she's a millionairess in her own right! To think of being protégée to a woman like that!"

"You feel you should allow Wolmott to speak to her about you, then?"

"Allow him? What are you talking about! I'm her grand-daughter, aren't I? I've a right to a proper place in society."

"Yes, but Yvonne—"

"Naturally I should have to humour the old lady. She is head of the family, after all, and the Brchavres aren't nobodies. She'd expect me to behave as becomes a Brehavre. But she'd see I had an income to enable me to do so. I wonder if she prefers to speak French or English? I must ask Mr. Wolmott when I see him."

"Yvonne, listen to me a minute. Aren't you forgetting something—or rather someone?"

"No, I don't think so. Wolmott is the obvious man to consult—" She broke off. "What do you mean?" she asked slowly.

"I'm talking about Gregg. Are you going to marry him, Yvonne?"

Yvonne's eyes narrowed. "Of course I am. He and I belong together."

"Then why the delay?"

"Because—because—oh, a hundred reasons. This place, for instance. How could I marry and settle down here? As soon as I had time to look around I realized it would never do. But now everything has been made plain sailing. With the money we get from Grand'mère we can go and settle in Harley Street—"

"Yvonne, you can't settle in Harley Street just like that—"

"We certainly won't stay here once we have money, that I can assure you of!" Yvonne declared passionately. "Ah, *cette sacrée vie de province! Je l'hais, moi*—I hate it here in the provinces! With no money—ah no, it is finished."

"But Gregg mightn't share your views."

"And that is what you hope, isn't it?" Yvonne laughed. "You hope we will quarrel, don't you? Well, you're wasting your time. I can handle Gregg. He'll accept my decision—you heard him say he'd leave it all to me. Very well, then, I decide to accept whatever Grand'mère Brehavre proposes, and with her help to live the kind of life I was brought up to. And Gregg will do as I say." She glanced about the tiny yet comfortable flat. "And as for this pigeon-hole of a place, we will leave it, and the boring Phyllis Michael too. I will make Gregg go to London and do something—I don't care what, but something—more suitable to the husband of a grand-daughter of the Brehavres."

"Gregg's wishes don't come into it at all?" Alison, demanded.

"No, why should they? All Gregg wants is for me to be happy. Well, now he knows how to achieve that."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"So the young lady is applying to be accepted as an obedient young member of the Brehavre family tribe?" Mr. Preston asked with genial irony. "Well, I think she shows great good sense. If Madame Brehavre were a relative of mine I'd just be as eager to get into her good books."

"What did Gregg say about it?" Tyler put in.

"He didn't say much. He said it was Yvonne's affair and he'd let her do all the talking."

They were in Preston's office, an unexpectedly charming and airy room on the third floor of one of the new blocks in the City. Alison had travelled from Bradlow that morning and had come by appointment straight to this meeting. The lawyer sat back in his desk arm-chair, rubbing his hand back and forth through his scant white hair.

"Yes, yes, very sensible. He sounds after all a very level-headed fellow. If he behaves himself Madame Brehavre may take a fancy to him too. Very sensible and satisfactory."

"What's the next step?" Tyler inquired.

"Oh, I imagine I ought to find an opportunity for another informal chat with Wolmott. He'll be very, very pleased. If this girl's as pretty as you say she is, Madame will be tickled to death to find her, and naturally that will put Wolmott in high favour. And of course *he* won't forget *me* for having tipped him the wink." He twinkled at Alison. "I'm really very grateful to you, young lady. If ever you want your will drawn up, you can rely on very favourable terms from me."

"I'll remember that," she laughed.

Tyler offered to drive her home. It would be the first time he had been back to Crownham Square since that dreadful afternoon in the autumn when he had learned the truth about Yvonne.

"I find it strange she hasn't married Gregg yet," he ventured

as they crawled through the unending jams of the afternoon traffic. "I suppose there really is no doubt that she still loves him?"

"Absolutely none," she returned with conviction. "It's difficult to be certain about much where Yvonne is concerned, but she loves Gregg now and I think she always will. Mind you, I think she almost resents the fact. She can see he's going to be a terrible drag on her when she sets out to dazzle Society with the Brehavre dollars."

"Perhaps after all she'll turn away from him. There's so much to attract her elsewhere."

Alison studied his profile as he guided his big American car in and out of the traffic. "Tyler dear," she began, and stopped.

"Yes?"

"Now that the situation has changed a little for Yvonne—now that you know she's still a single girl—"

"Yes? Go on." He found a moment to glance at her in puzzlement.

"You wouldn't be allowing yourself to hope again?"

He gave a little gasping laugh, but made no reply until at length he drew up outside her home. Then he sat watching the December wind whip the leafless trees to and fro.

"It's many days now," he said at length, "since she ceased to trouble me. I can think of her now with a kind of horrified wonder. To think I loved her!"

"Are you sure it's completely over?"

"Quite sure. The feeling I had for her was unbelievably intense while it lasted, almost like a fever that wouldn't let me rest. But, like a fever, it burned itself out once I learned the truth."

They sat in silence for a while. Then Alison roused herself and opened the car door. "Do come in," she urged. "After all, we're friends of long standing now. It's ridiculous that you should keep avoiding my people. If you're cured—and I believe you are—prove it by coming in to meet them again."

"If I could only be sure your mother wouldn't start apologizing to me!" he said ruefully.

"I guarantee to stop her the moment her tone grows apologetic." She took his arm and pulled him, and he allowed himself to be persuaded out of the car and into the house.

But he sighed with relief when she had to report that the house was empty. Her mother had apparently gone out on some last-minute Christmas shopping.

"Coward," she taunted him. "I've a good mind to keep you here till she gets back, only that might be seven o'clock. Would you like some tea to keep your strength up?"

"Oh, don't bother. You must be tired after all your dashing about."

"Not a bit." The truth was, she *wanted* to keep him here. She needed company—anyone's company—so as not to remember Gregg as she had last seen him, waving goodbye to her as the train carried her away from Bradlow that morning.

Tyler followed her into the kitchen and watched her as she moved deftly about.

"There's lots to be said for a woman in a kitchen," he observed, folding his arms and leaning in the doorway.

"Such as what?"

"More decorative than a manservant, and not so sergeant-majorish. Folkson rules me with a rod of iron."

"But he's a good cook."

"And he knows it. He chooses all the menus—I never get a word in. What he needs is a woman to take charge of him."

"You mean you're thinking of engaging a housekeeper?" Alison said, leading the way back to the sitting-room with the tea tray.

"No, I don't think Folkson would like that."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. Besides you're very happy as you are, really. You wouldn't really like to change, admit it."

He accepted his cup of tea and said with a sudden smile, "You're trying to file me away in a drawer marked 'Stuffy old bachelor'."

Immediately she was aghast. "Tyler, I didn't mean that. I hope

you don't think I was being patronizing. I just thought you were comfortable as you were."

"You couldn't be patronizing. You're always considerate and thoughtful for others. I wish you'd be as considerate to yourself. I watch you hurrying through your life, scarcely finding time to think about your own affairs. I sometimes want to catch you by the arm and say 'Wait a minute—think of yourself for a change. What do you want out of life?' What would your answer be, Alison?"

"Oh . . . I don't know . . . Recently I haven't thought beyond the next week or the next month."

"Have you ever thought about getting married?"

There was something in the quiet question that made her glance up from her preoccupation with the tea-tray. He reached over and took her hand. Without quite thinking what she was doing, she tried to withdraw it.

"No, just a minute, Alison," he begged. "I've something I want to say. Until a day or two ago I was quite unaware of my own feelings, but now—"

"Please, Tyler. This is a mistake, really it is."

"Not so far as I'm concerned. Alison, I think I've been falling gradually in love with you for a month or more. But it was only while you were away yesterday and the day before that I realized how much my life had twined itself round yours. I missed not being able to phone you—I missed not looking forward to seeing you in the evening. Only two days, and yet it seemed like weeks until you were back!"

"But it isn't love, Tyler. We're very good friends, but we're not in love."

"You can only speak for yourself, though. You can't know how I feel. I've only just understood my own feelings. I do love you, Alison."

"No, no!" She was very distressed at this totally unexpected twist of events. "Don't you see what's happened? You've been lonely and unhappy, with good reason, and I just happened to be there, someone you could talk to."

"Why was I able to talk to you? Why did I find such comfort in just being with you? Don't you think it may have been because we were suited to each other? I know this much—I'd always liked and admired you very deeply, even while I was still infatuated with Yvonne."

"Tyler, it's *because* of that that you believe you're in love with me now," she argued desperately. "It's because your life was full of promise a few months ago and you want it to be that way again. You're mistaking friendship—"

"It's no use, my love," he interrupted gently. "I'm not a boy, you know. I'm not trying to push you on-stage in the role that Yvonne was to have filled. The feeling I have for you is quite different—calmer, stronger, more enduring. I don't expect you to feel the same way about me, not yet." His eyes searched her face. "I don't think you love me. But you do like me?"

"Oh, Tyler, you know I do!"

"That's all I ask for the moment. Time may bring the next step but even if not, we could be very happy together, you and I. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know, Tyler. I don't know."

"Think about it. There's no hurry. Just think about the fact that I've fallen deeply in love with you and that I'm offering you that love in a marriage partnership." He let go of her hand and stood up. "And now I'll leave you alone. We could hardly sit and drink tea now, could we?"

"I wish it had never happened," Alison said dejectedly. "Things can never be the same again between us."

"I don't want them to be," he replied, almost with gaiety. "I want things to go on to a new stage. I'm hoping you'll want the same when you think it over."

He walked into the hall to pick up his overcoat. Alison grasped his sleeve. "Tyler, please don't build up any hopes. You see, I can't feel about you in that way, because—"

Before she could finish he caught her in his arms and kissed her. The strength and passion in the movement took her by surprise. His mouth was warm and hard on hers, yet gentle. She didn't

resist. After a moment she even responded to his caress. Perhaps because she was lonely. Perhaps because she was grateful. Perhaps, even, because he was dear to her, dear as a friend.

When he let her go he was smiling. "I promise not to build up any hopes," he said. "But I can't help thinking that's not a bad start."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THAT evening a vast bouquet of pink roses was brought to the door by a smart page boy in a green uniform. Roses in December! The card with them said simply "Just to mark a hopeful beginning."

"He's so nice," Alison said to herself when she read it. "He's such a fine man—good in the best sense of the word. I ought to be tremendously grateful to him for thinking of me like this."

Her parents' eyes widened when they saw the bouquet. "From Tyler!" said her mother in wonder. And was lost in thought.

They knew, of course, that she'd been seeing Tyler rather frequently of late. It had been no secret. They even knew that it was on some business to do with Tyler that Alison had gone to see Yvonne. But an armful of roses in December meant something more than they'd been prepared for. It made a great impression on Sylvia in particular; she had been listening with interest to Alison's account of Yvonne, but now she suddenly seemed to be thinking about something else.

"If we asked Tyler to dinner here," she said suddenly, "do you think he would come?"

"Yes, I think he would."

"I mean, after all that's happened?"

"Yes, even so."

"M-mm . . ." She considered. "It's too late to ask him for Christmas, I suppose."

"He's spending Christmas with his mother in Buckinghamshire."

"You haven't been invited to go there, I suppose?"

"No I haven't," Alison said with vexation. "And if I had I should have refused."

"That would have been a silly thing to do."

"Now, Sylvia," put in Alison's father, "you know very well

we'd been counting on a cosy family Christmas, just the three of us."

"It won't be very gay, though, will it?"

"Gay? Gracious, my dear, I'd have thought we'd had enough gaiety in this house recently to last us a lifetime!"

Sylvia's eyes filled with tears. "There you go again!" she complained. "You both keep telling me to forget the past and look to the future; but every time I try to, you remind me of it fast enough!"

"Dad didn't mean it like that, Mother," soothed Alison. "But we did plan for a nice quiet Christmas, didn't we, because we thought it would be so restful."

"Christmas isn't a time for being restful," her mother returned with scorn. "And I'm sick of resting, anyhow!" Which was a clear sign that her health at any rate was much improved.

Seeing that this wasn't the time to reason with her, Alison made her escape to the kitchen to make the bedtime drinks. Her father followed her there.

"Don't think I'm interfering," he said. "But those roses from Tyler must have meant something?"

She nodded. "To him—a great deal."

"But not to you?"

"I'm very fond of him, Dad."

"But not four dozen roses' worth?"

She smiled. "Put it that way if you like."

"It's a pity it's been brought to your mother's eye. She'll have it on her mind from now on."

"It can't be helped. But I do hope she doesn't start playing Cupid. That would swamp us in embarrassment and kill off any feeling I do have for him."

"You wouldn't want that to happen?"

"No-o—I shouldn't want to see him suffering under Mother's tactlessness. But that doesn't mean I—Oh, I don't know."

Her father looked thoughtful. "Well," he remarked, "I'm not going to say much because this is your own affair entirely. But you'll remember that the Blakelocks were responsible for Tyler's

most unhappy experience, and if it could happen that the Blake-locks could also make it up to him, I'd be very happy. I like Tyler. I always did, and it was partly because of my liking for him that I was so angry with Yvonne. If I can do anything to help things along by holding your mother in check, rely on me for that."

So he was giving her his blessing if she decided to accept Tyler. Alison couldn't be indifferent to his opinion. Her mother too—how delighted she would be if Alison were to marry Tyler!

There was nothing against it. Many people got married with less chance of happiness. She was sure that Tyler would love and cherish her, that he would be a kind, considerate helpmate. She in turn would gladly give her energies to making him happy. She shared many of his interests, his tastes. She would look after him and help him. He had been so unhappy—didn't he deserve some recompense?

As for herself, Gregg was lost to her. He and Yvonne would soon be married now that money difficulties were to be removed. Why think of him any more? Gregg didn't want her, had never wanted her. To him she was a staunch friend, a good comrade—worthwhile things in themselves, but not what she wanted to be for Gregg.

Whereas to Tyler she was the fulfilment of his hopes, a woman to love for the rest of his life. It could be a happy marriage. She ought not to turn her back on it out of nostalgic longings for the might-have-been. She told herself that next time Tyler spoke to her of his feelings she would be less ready to tell him there was no hope.

This was still her state of mind when next day, Christmas Eve, the last of the Christmas mail came through the letter-box. Among the cards was a sealed envelope, addressed in that energetic scribble she remembered so well from the days when Gregg had worked beside her in Crownham District Hospital.

"I couldn't send you a Christmas card," he wrote. "Between us that would seem a meaningless formality. But I couldn't let Christmas go by without sending you my good wishes and, much

more to the point, my thanks for all you've tried to do for us. I don't think it's likely you and I will see each other again so God bless you, Alison, and reward you with your heart's desire."

The words swam before her eyes. Conscious that her mother would notice if she made the slightest sign, she refolded the letter and put it carefully back in its envelope.

"Not a card, dear?" Sylvia inquired.

She shook her head.

"Who's it from?"

"Oh, a friend. You know how people make an effort at Christmas."

"Yes, it takes one by surprise, doesn't it." And her mother prattled on about friends of her youth whom she never saw now but who still sent cards each Christmas.

Alison gladly let her talk. In the meantime her own thoughts went winging away. She thought of Gregg in the hospital at Bradlow. She thought of the Christmas gaiety that cheered the wards and brought a touch of home to the lonely and forlorn. She thought of the nurses singing carols by lantern light, and the tallest of the male staff teetering on ladders to pin up mistletoe, and the rowdy rounds on Christmas Day when the turkey was carved by the surgeons and served by the doctors.

Then she thought of Gregg going up to his room high in the hospital, changing into his outdoor clothes, going out to meet Yvonne for some part of the Christmas season. She thought of the strange limbo in which he was living—free and yet bound, dedicated to his work and yet torn from it by the needs of the girl he loved.

She was still obsessed with these thoughts when at length she went to her own room. Here the roses filled the air with their smooth fragrance, and made her remember Tyler.

"How easily he was blotted out of my mind," she reproached herself. "Six lines in Gregg's handwriting, and Tyler was utterly forgotten."

She couldn't marry Tyler. So long as the mere sight of a letter from Gregg could clutch at her heart like this it would be unfair

to marry another man. Gregg's shadow would always come between them.

With the New Year came a spell of appalling weather. Tyler said ruefully, "I was going to invite you out to Ames Place. My mother very much wants to meet you. But this is hardly the time of year for it."

She seized her chance. "I'd rather not in any case, Tyler. It might give rise to—to speculation."

"That was partly the idea."

"I thought it was. Tyler, I'm going to be very frank with you. I can't at present say that I feel for you a deep enough affection for marriage."

"But you don't rule it out for the future?" he countered anxiously.

"No-o . . . But this much I'm sure of. It wouldn't be the near future."

"Then I shall wait and hope."

"But it isn't fair to you. I can't tell you how long it might be before—before—You must believe me, Tyler. It would be better to stop seeing each other."

"Alison!" He was shocked. "You wouldn't do that to me!"

"Don't look like that, my dear. I'm sorry. But we can't go on meeting as friends. Things have changed between us and though you said you wanted it that way, I can't—I can't face it. I can't let you hope and plan when I—I—"

"Alison, my dear," he said swiftly, all concern for her, "what's the matter? I've been making a nuisance of myself to you—that's what it is, isn't it? Darling, I'm sorry. The last thing I want is to make you unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy. At least—it's not your doing. But I must admit I don't find it easy to pretend we're on the verge of a happy romance. I don't think we are, Tyler. And I don't believe we ever will be."

He sat looking at her for a long moment. Then he said sadly, "There's someone else, isn't there?"

She nodded.

"Gregg?"

"No—please, Tyler—I don't want to talk about it."

"I used to think that you and he were practically engaged but you told me I was mistaken."

"So you were. There was never anything like that, never. It's just been my own stubborn stupidity. I fell in love with him and nothing's been able to change me. Gregg doesn't even know."

He took her hands and pressed them gently. "Such a waste, my dear, such a waste. Despite what you say, I'm still going to hope. Because soon the only rival I need fear will be gone."

"Gone?"

"From what Preston tells me, they'll be leaving for Montreal any day now."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

So that was what Gregg had meant when he said in his letter that probably he wouldn't see her again. Leaving England!

Yet what difference did it make? Did distance across the ocean create a greater gulf than the fact that he loved someone else?

On Friday evening Alison and her parents were just rising from the tea table when the door bell rang. "I'll go," said Sylvia guiltily. "It's probably Mrs. Wilson with that sweater I asked her to knit for you, Alison."

Off she hurried before Alison could protest that she didn't need a new sweater. Next moment there came a cry of astonishment from the hall.

"Yvonne!"

Alison swung round from the table. Her father started to his feet.

"Yvonne! My dear, dear girl!" Sylvia was ushering her niece eagerly into the dining-room. "Isn't it wonderful to see her, Eric?"

Her husband looked as if it were less of a pleasure to him. Alison knew that her father had not forgiven Yvonne, neither for her conduct nor for the things she had said before she left the house. He came forward now without haste.

"Is Gregg with you?" he inquired.

"No, he wouldn't come. I left him in conference with Mr. Wolmott—that's Grand'mère's lawyer. You know what men are like when they start discussing business." She held out a hand beautifully gloved in powder blue French suede. "I hope you're not still cross with me, Uncle Eric?"

"I have every reason to be."

"Oh, Eric, you're not going to rake all that up again, surely!" Sylvia cried reproachfully. "When Yvonne's come all the way from Bradlow just to see us?"

"I can't truthfully say that's why I came," Yvonne put in, laughing. "We're in London to settle final business details before we leave for Canada. This is the first chance I've had to pay you a visit, but I felt I couldn't leave the country without setting your mind at rest for the future."

"You're really going?" Sylvia said, her face falling. "For good?"

"Oh yes—we're going to settle in Montreal. Grand'mère Brehavre insists on having us right beside her."

"And Gregg's going too?" persisted Sylvia.

Yvonne shot a glance to make sure Alison was paying attention. "Naturally. Grand'mère wants to meet him and then we'll be married in Montreal immediately. It's all arranged. The whole family will be there. It will be a very grand affair."

"I wish I could be there to see it," sighed Sylvia. "You'll be married in white, of course?"

"Of course, and with Grand'mère's veil and pearl head-dress. I'd invite you to the wedding, Aunt Sylvia, only I don't think Grand'mère would like it. She wants it to be a Brehavre affair entirely."

Alison's father had listened to this exchange with displeased attention. He now said disgustedly, "And Gregg? What does he say to all this?"

"He's delighted, of course. It means that from now on we never need to have the slightest concern about money. Grand'mère will provide for our future entirely."

"Good luck to him," muttered Eric.

"What about his career?" Alison put in, unable to refrain from the question.

"His career? Oh—I see what you mean. Oh, that's all taken care of. He's to be made a director of one of the Brehavre shipping lines, in charge of the medical supplies to the ships and so on."

"But he's a surgeon!" Alison protested.

"Come now, Alison, you don't really think Grand'mère could allow the husband of her grand-daughter to go on with a career like that? It's not even as if he were a famous surgeon. He hadn't

got anywhere yet. How could she introduce him—"My granddaughter's husband, a sawbones from an English provincial hospital?" No, no, it just wouldn't fit in. Luckily he seems to have quite a knack for business. He and Mr. Wolmott were deep in facts and figures when I left them."

"I can't understand it," Alison said helplessly. "He may not be famous—not yet. But he's a brilliant surgeon. How can he give it up?"

"I didn't have much difficulty in persuading him," Yvonne said negligently. "But then I told you I thought I could get things settled without much trouble. Didn't I?"

Alison was silent. Sylvia broke in with, "How are you going to Montreal? By one of the Brehavre ships?"

"At this time of the year? The crossing would be agony. No, Grand'mère wouldn't allow that. And besides she wants to see us as soon as possible. So we're going by air."

"I thought you didn't like air travel, Yvonne."

"I don't really. But at this stage of the affair it's better to fall in with Grand'mère's wishes. Later on, if I come back, I hope to cross on the *Queen Elizabeth* or the *United States*. One gets a chance to meet interesting people on a crossing like that."

"Oh, I don't know so much, Yvonne," objected Sylvia seriously. "These days it's rather the done thing to fly. When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow. That's why Gregg and Mr. Wolmott have to get these details cleared up tonight. And then off we go, winging our way towards a happy new life."

"No doubt," said Eric. "I only hope neither of you ever has reason to regret it."

"I know I certainly shan't. And so long as Gregg is with me, he certainly won't."

Eric shook his head. "I suppose it's all right," he muttered, "but somehow it's not what I expected of him."

His wife was too taken up with the excitement of Yvonne's future to hear Eric's doubts. "You will let me know how you get on, won't you? I shall be dying to hear, Yvonne."

"I'll send you a cable," she promised. "And later I'll write you all the news. I don't know when I'll be back in London—probably not for a year or two. I get the impression Grand'mère would prefer us to stay close to home for a while. That means that even if what I hear is true and there's another wedding in the family fairly soon, I shan't be able to come over for it." She smiled at Alison.

"Oh, you've heard? Who told you?" Sylvia asked proudly.

"Mr. Wolmott mentioned that he'd heard a rumour. It's funny, isn't it?" she said musingly. "Tyler really seems determined to marry into the Blakelock family."

Her uncle was scandalized and upset. "I don't know how you can talk like that!" he exclaimed, "I really don't!"

"Oh, Eric, don't take everything so seriously," his wife countered. "Yvonne was only joking—weren't you, Yvonne?"

"Of course. I hope you'll be very happy, Alison. I'm sure Gregg would say the same if he were here. He didn't actually give me any message for you, but I remember he told Mr. Wolmott that he wasn't the least surprised at the news."

"Wasn't he?" Sylvia said innocently. "We were."

"So was I. But Gregg seems to have been expecting it." She shook her head at Alison. "You are a dark horse, aren't you, Alison?"

"I think I ought to say here and now that I haven't said I'll marry Tyler."

"No, but you'd be a fool not to." Yvonne's eyes held a special message for Alison. "After all, the way things have turned out, why shouldn't you?"

"That's what I say, and I expect it'll come out right in the end," agreed her aunt.

"Just as it has for Gregg and me—yes, I hope so. Well, darlings, I must go. I'm meeting Gregg and Mr. Wolmott at the Dorchester for dinner—hence the décolleté." She indicated the beautiful semi-evening dress of stiff blue silk. "Goodbye, Aunt Sylvia. I'll cable you as soon as I arrive to let you know what I think of things. Goodbye, Uncle Eric."

She kissed her aunt, and turned to do the same for her uncle. He stepped back, held out his hand stiffly, and when she took it gave one stiff shake and let go. She shrugged and looked at Alison. "See me out," she invited.

Alison went with her into the hall. Yvonne let her open the door so that she could see the handsome hired car waiting for the guest. Then she turned to look squarely at Alison.

"I told you I'd make you regret what you did to me," she said. "You'll *go on* paying after tonight. Every time you think of Gregg's wasted skill—every time you think of the ocean that separates you. Yes, and even when you see love in Tyler's face, and wish with all your heart that it was Gregg looking at you like that."

"Do you really hate me so much?" Alison asked faintly.

"It's not a question of hate. It's a question of paying off old scores. Oh yes, Alison—it will be a long time before you can think of Gregg without agony. That will add to my pleasure in having him at my side so many miles away from you."

She stepped out of the house. A uniformed chauffeur opened the car door for her. She got in, and was driven away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

NEXT day Alison looked out of the ward window now and again to watch the high white ribbons of an aircraft's tracks. The feathery trails on the winter-blue sky pointed the way towards the ocean across which Gregg was to begin a new life.

"He'll never be happy," she told herself desolately. "Surgery was all he wanted to do in life. Director in charge of medical supplies for ships—it's cheap and silly and wasteful! Oh, how could he let them do this to him? How could he?"

But the answer was immediate. He was doing it because it was what Yvonne wanted. Alison was angry with him, disappointed in him. Yet it all ended in pitying him.

On Sunday while her parents were at church a cable was delivered. Alison walked into the sitting-room with it, afraid to open it. The draught from the door she had left open swept after her, but was not so chill as the reluctance she felt to open this envelope and see that Yvonne had triumphed once and for all.

"Arrived safely Montreal," it said. "Grand'mère delighted with me, everything fine. Gregg sends regards. Love, Yvonne."

Alison stood looking at it. "Gregg sends regards." This was the end of what had once seemed to her the most rewarding friendship she had ever begun. She tried to picture him as he had been when first he came to Crownham District Hospital—young, enthusiastic, alert. What was he now?—a paid yes-man in the Brehavre Shipping Company. She might even see his picture in the magazines from time to time—one of those shadowy figures in evening dress who filled the background while press photographers took shots of a reigning society beauty in her latest Paris gown.

What was the use of thinking about him? She was fulfilling Yvonne's prediction, that was all—thinking of him with agony, paying over and over again with this exquisite pain for having dared to oppose Yvonne.

"Is anybody home?" called a voice in the hall. "Hi—Alison? Mr. Blakelock? Your front door's wide open."

She shuddered, and turned to go to the door. Now she was having hallucinations. That had sounded like Gregg's voice. She was going mad.

In the hall stood a tall brown-haired man. Of course it couldn't be Gregg. Gregg was in Canada.

"What's the matter?" he said in alarm. "My God—you're not going to faint, are you?"

It wasn't imagination. He was real, he was solid, he was healthy flesh and blood—she knew this because she had him in her arms. "Hold me tight," she stammered. "Don't let go. I'm not going to faint, but don't let go."

"Is it my fault? What have I done? Dear heart, don't, don't go on like this! My love, my sweet, tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's shock, that's all. I thought you were in Canada."

"Me?" he said, and the note of complete surprise was so strong that she could hear it vibrate in his chest, against which she was clasped so firmly. "What the devil would I be doing in Canada?"

"Managing a shipping line," she said weakly, and began to laugh.

"Here, come and sit down. Are you hysterical?" he asked sternly. "Managing a shipping line? *Me?*"

"She said you were going to be a director on one of the Brehavre lines. In charge of medical supplies to the ships."

"By kind permission of Grand'mère, I suppose." His face was grim. He lowered Alison by the elbows into the nearest arm-chair in the sitting-room, and sat on the arm so that he could keep one hand on her shoulder. "That girl," he said coldly. "What was she up to this time?"

"Never mind about her, Gregg. You're here. That's all that matters to me."

He leaned over to peer into her face. "It was true after all," he murmured softly. "I didn't dare to believe it when he told me."

"Who told you? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Tyler. On whose head," he added with

fervour, "be blessings. If he hadn't spoken up, I'd never have dared come near you for the next half dozen years. By which time you really *would* have married him, I feel sure."

"I wish I knew what this is all about," Alison said dreamily. "I feel as if I've got caught in the middle of a merry-go-round. I thought you'd gone to Canada to marry Yvonne."

"But what the dickens gave you that mad idea?"

"*She* did. She came here on Friday night to say goodbye and confide all her plans. You and she were to be married at a big family wedding as soon as you reached Montreal. She was going to wear Grand'mère's lace veil and pearls. You were to have a job in the shipping line because Grand'mère didn't approve of unknown young surgeons for her grand-daughter."

"My God!" He sprang angrily to his feet and slapped the palm of his hand on top of the bureau so that it made a sound like a pistol shot. "I wish I could say what I'm thinking now, but you'd never speak to me again if you heard it! Heavens above, Alison—where did she dig up all that fantastic nonsense? And why? That's what I can't fathom!"

"It was to pay me out," Alison explained. She too rose and came to stand beside him, putting her hands on his lapels. "She knew I loved you. She found that out early on."

"I wish I'd known," he replied quietly. "Oh, how I wish I'd known, Alison."

He put one hand either side of her face. He kissed her gently on the lips, once, twice. Then he gathered her into his arms and the kisses were not to be counted. Alison felt herself pitch headlong into eternity, yet there was no sense of fear—only gladness and confidence. Worlds might crumble, stars might cease to shine: let it happen, she had known this moment.

"You know now," she whispered to him after a while.

"If I had known at the time I received your letter about Yvonne's determination to marry Tyler, I wouldn't have let myself come face to face with her. But you see, I thought you were in love with Tyler."

"Who gave you that idea?" she asked incredulously.

"Why, you did! You seemed to think so highly of him—and you wrote begging for help to get him out of Yvonne's clutches—Well, think me a fool if you like, but I thought you cared about him, and I came to try to help save him from Yvonne. Of course I'd still have done that in any case, but if I'd known it was me you wanted I wouldn't have let Yvonne twine herself round me again."

"You mean that when you went away with her that night, knowing she expected to marry you, you'd no feeling for her?"

He hesitated. "I'll be honest with you, Alison. I felt a great pity for her at that moment, and I think I persuaded myself it was love of a kind. But I certainly wasn't in love with her in the way I had been at first. That seemed to fade almost as soon as I was out of range of her magic spell. Four or five weeks without seeing her, and I was asking myself if I'd taken leave of my senses ever to have got involved with her."

"Yet you would have married her."

"If she wanted it—yes, I would. I felt I owed her that much, you see. It was my fault she'd been shown up before Tyler and your family. I had to stand by her. And you know—don't mind my saying this—she does love me, Alison."

"Oh yes, I know that. She loved you in her own strange way and still does."

He smiled and held her close. "No one else could talk with so much calm compassion about a girl who'd tried her best to wreck everything. You're a very special person, my darling."

"No I'm not. If I were special I'd be able to work out what happened without having to ask you to explain."

"It's good for me to have to do it. Like wearing a hair shirt. Penance for past sins and stupidity."

"Don't talk about it if you don't want to," she said gently.

"But I do want to. I want to have it all straightened out so that we can go on together without any misunderstandings." He tightened his hold around her shoulders and added in her ear, "So long as you don't wriggle out of my arms, I'll know I'm still being forgiven. Now listen. This is how I saw it from my point

of view. I began to realize Yvonne wasn't quite perfect about the time of the missing Mahoney file. How is he, by the way?"

"Mahoney? Fine. He went back to work last month."

"Did he, by jove. Good old Groome. I bet he's pleased as punch at his handiwork. Where was I?"

"You had begun to have doubts—"

"So I had. Still, I explained all that away. Then came the engagement to Tyler. I couldn't explain that away, could I. Soon after I got to Bradlow, things began to fall into place—little things I'd noticed subconsciously—a tone in Yvonne's voice, an opinion I'd heard expressed. I began to feel I'd been lucky to escape. Then one night—I shall always remember it, we had a patient collapse in the post-op. ward and I suddenly thought of you. Well, that did it. I felt I'd been just about as big a fool as a man who buys Buckingham Palace from a confidence trickster."

"If you had only come to me then," she said with faint regret.

"I was going to. I meant to come and throw myself on your mercy, but you know how it is in hospital life—you can't just down tools and attend to your personal affairs when you want to. Before I could get away, that pathetic letter of yours about Tyler arrived. And that was that. I was sure it meant you loved him, and though, as I say, I would have come anyway, it made this much difference—when Yvonne claimed me, I didn't try to escape."

"Did she know how you felt?"

"I don't think so. In fact she's gone to Canada firmly convinced I'll be on the next plane. 'As soon as you begin to miss me,' she said, 'you'll come.'"

"Were you offered a job on the board of directors?"

"No, I wasn't. It was understood almost from the outset that if Yvonne went to Canada she went on her own. I couldn't have lived that sort of life, Alison—sponging on Grand'mère Brehavre for the rest of our lives. What would have happened to our self-respect? So that was Yvonne's choice—she could stay in England and settle down to be the wife of a surgeon, or she could go to Montreal and be the petted grand-daughter of a rich family.

She chose the latter. But she's convinced she's only got to wait and she'll win the last round too."

"I really thought you had gone," Alison murmured, looking down and feeling ashamed. "I believed all she told me about your new job and how you would live with Grand'mère. If you hadn't walked in when you did, I should never have known the truth." She tugged at his jacket. "Why did you come today, Gregg?"

"I told you—it was because of Tyler."

"But how does he come into it?"

"Yvonne and I came up to town on Friday to settle the last few details. I had to sign a paper saying I made no claim of any kind on Yvonne—"

"Oh, Gregg!" Her cheeks flamed with anger. "How dare they make you do that!"

"Tut, tut, don't look so cross." He kissed her lightly where the spots of high colour had appeared. "They had to take precautions, I suppose, in case I brought a suit afterwards—breach of promise or something. Anyhow, while the old lawyer and I were arguing, he brought out some gossip about an engagement between you and Tyler."

"Yvonne mentioned that," she admitted.

"Well, for once she was speaking the truth. Now they knew nothing more than that you were expected to marry Tyler, and after I left Wolmott's office I got to wondering when the wedding was to be, and so on. I had an hour or so to spare before driving back to Bradlow. So I thought I'd call on Tyler, thank him for all he'd done to help Yvonne, and congratulate him."

"And that was when he told you?" she whispered.

"And that was when he told me. I said 'Congratulations', he said 'What for', I said 'For having the luck to marry a girl like Alison', and he said 'But she refused me'. Just like that. I dare say I looked dumbfounded. When I came to, he was giving me a lecture and the gist of it seemed to be that you had refused him because you were in love with me."

"But that was Friday night!" Alison accused him, thumping him gently with her fists. "Where have you been until now?"

"Carrying out a mastoid operation if you must know," he said, capturing her hands. "I came as soon as ever I could. I'd have crawled on my hands and knees if I had to. I still really wasn't sure if it was true, until I saw your face when you came out into the hall. Then I knew."

Alison laid her head against his shoulder and laughed a little. "I thought you were a hallucination. You see, I'd just been reading a cable from Yvonne."

"A cable?"

She glanced about the room and saw it on the floor by an armchair. "There," she pointed.

Rather reluctantly he freed himself to go and pick it up. He smoothed it out and read it. When he looked up his eyes were full of anger. "But this is sheer malevolence!"

"She's a strange girl," Alison sighed. "I doubt if she'll ever be happy. She can't bear to be thwarted even in small things. I refused to obey her commands, and she told me I would be punished. The punishment was that I should believe you'd wrecked your career and your life for her sake, you see."

"And this was to add veracity to the tale? My darling, no wonder you looked so white and shocked when I came in!"

"It doesn't matter. I think I shall keep it and frame it. You see, Gregg, if it hadn't been for that cable, I might have been more in control of myself when you arrived, and we shouldn't be like this now." She put her arms round his neck and stood on tiptoe to kiss him.

"If you were the revengeful type you could send her a reply," he suggested. "Gregg and I getting married by special licence next week—how would that sound?"

"Would it be true?" she asked.

"Well, would it?" he countered.

She smiled and relaxed in his arms. "I can't think of a single reason why not," she said simply.

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